
EPILOGUE

Reading this history of the National Association of Letter Carriers can be a disorienting experience. The story line is constantly circling back, repeating itself, with essential elements resurfacing again and again. As the preceding pages have shown, this is a story of persistence and resilience, of brothers (and later sisters) constantly striving—the issues rarely changing, the struggles never ending.

Take, for example, management's never-ending attempts to squeeze more work out of carriers than humanly possible—from Frederick Taylor's scientific management techniques of the 1910s, to the Letter Carrier Route Evaluation System of the mid-1970s, to the Delivery Operations Information System of the 21st century. Measure, count, time. From stopwatches to computers, it's been the same: deliver more mail to more homes and businesses faster, then tomorrow deliver even more mail to even more homes and businesses even faster.

But this union has never succumbed—always fighting to stop the stopwatches and rip up the computer-generated spreadsheets, always taking whatever action is necessary to keep carriers' work “fair, reasonable, and equitable.”

Again and again and again.

Of course, management has not been letter carriers' only adversary—on numerous occasions, the nation's political leaders joined the fray by trying to prevent carriers and their union from bringing their concerns to the attention of their elected representatives. The infamous Roosevelt and Taft “gag orders” in the first decade of the 20th century, rescinded in 1912, as well as the 1939 Hatch Act, finally repealed in 1993, told letter carriers in unmistakable terms that they were second-class citizens, American enough to shoulder a satchel, even fight a war, but not American enough to participate fully in the nation's democracy.

Ever since the strike of 1970, the battle for decent wages, benefits and working conditions has moved to the negotiating table. Over time, the NALC has successfully resisted most of postal management's knee-jerk proposals for reduced wages and benefits, two-tier workforces, and more onerous working conditions, while demanding, often successfully, major improvements in the wages, benefits and working conditions.

Again and again and again.

But the history of the National Association of Letter Carriers has not only been a story of the struggle to improve the working lives of letter carriers. It is also the story of men—and later, women—committed to serving the American people and ensuring that the United States Postal Service continues to fulfill its legal mandate to “provide prompt, reliable, and efficient services to patrons in all areas and...postal services to all communities.”

Take a look at the NALC Constitution, Article 1, Section 5, stating that one of the union's objectives is “to strive for the constant improvement of the Service.” It's not clear how far back those exact words go, but the idea has been around since the union's founding. In fact, Article II, Section 1 of the Constitution adopted in Milwaukee in August 1889 sets forth as an “object of the association...the advancement of the free delivery system.”

Ever since, this union and its members have believed that the job of a letter carrier is more than a job, but rather a mission, and that the Postal Service—even if sometimes an abusive and regressive employer—provides an essential service for the nation and its citizens.

Of course, depending upon when you're reading these words, whether the Postal Service will continue to provide the universal, quality service Americans deserve may be far from settled. Letter carriers and other postal employees may still be struggling with postal management and

Congress to ensure that the nation's postal system survives and prospers and that our postal networks, expanded over well more than two centuries, remain strong. If so, they will certainly be fighting to ensure that letter carriers are delivering to every home and business at least six days a week.

But maybe you'll be reading this after many of the disputes recorded in the last chapter of this history have been resolved—maybe in 2016 or 2020, maybe much later. Perhaps Congress and postal management will have finally understood that the Service could not “shrink to survive,” and that only by maintaining six-day delivery and, in some cases, even seven-day delivery, could the Service exploit the Internet-driven demand for package delivery and, as a result, not only survive but prosper. Perhaps those in Congress who will have fashioned this viable Postal Service will also have removed the unnecessary and costly burden of requiring the Service to pre-fund the health benefits of retirees not even on the rolls.

But if this optimistic scenario is to become reality, the Postal Service will likely have broadened its mandate to meet the changing demands of Americans in a digital age. As a result, the job of a letter carrier could very well be much different than it was in, say, 2014.

For one thing, by that time—whenever that may be—letter carriers will not be carrying very much first-class mail. Instead “letter carriers” may be mainly “parcel carriers,” with a smaller portion of their total deliveries consisting of “letter mail”—mostly advertising mail. The rest will probably be magazines, large-format advertising, and, of course, parcels. Lots of parcels, since parcel delivery will be an integral and integrated part of an expanding e-commerce sector of the economy. “Office time” could be slightly more than a “New York

minute.” And the battles with Congress over the continuation of six-day delivery may seem quaint, as future carriers are out on the streets every day of the week—sometimes picking up packages early in the day and delivering them across town a few hours later. Express mail on steroids.

But delivering letters, flats and packages may be just a part of what carriers do. They also will be the Postal Service's lead sales force—selling services, arranging pick-up and delivery times, even suggesting software innovations to help small businesses determine their shipping needs.

Carriers might also perform other services while completing their rounds—perhaps helping low-income customers connect online to a new USPS financial services system; or reading utility bills; or serving as mobile facilitators of government services, with keypad and Internet connection at the ready. In addition, these brothers and sisters of the National Association of Letter Carriers will be serving as a welcome and visible presence on the streets of America at a time when, with the decline of brick-and-mortar commercial establishments, the notion of “community” may have been radically altered.

Whatever the contours of a future (if not futuristic) Postal Service—whatever its size and products and services and regardless of how many letter carriers are fulfilling the needs of their customers—the men and women who will comprise the membership of the National Association of Letter Carriers in the years—even decades—ahead will continue to stand together, shoulder to shoulder. They will recognize—as they always have—that alone they are powerless, but together they are invincible. That is why letter carriers and their union will long remain, as they have been since 1889, carriers in a common cause.