



# Revisiting history

## Sombrotto slated to mark strike's milestone



President Emeritus Vincent R. Sombrotto at NALC's 2008 convention, held in Boston.

**O**n Saturday, March 20, the Smithsonian Institution's National Postal Museum in Washington will mark the 40th anniversary of the historic wildcat letter carrier strike with a lecture and discussion featuring NALC President Emeritus Vincent R. Sombrotto. The event will offer an opportunity to look back to a defining point in the mail's history, as well as toward the future.

Sombrotto, who served as the national union's president from 1979 to 2002, is a member of New York City, New York Branch 36. On March 17, 1970, he was one of the principal Branch 36 members who voted by a 3-to-2 margin to walk away from their routes to protest decades of low letter carrier wages and poor working conditions.

The seeds of discontent had been sown for years with financial hardship. In many locations, carriers were so poorly paid that they had to collect food stamps to feed their families. The situation was exacerbated when then-NALC President James Rademacher met with President Richard Nixon behind closed doors and agreed to support a proposed replacement of the Post Office Department with what we now know as the U.S. Postal Service. In exchange, Nixon approved a nominal letter carrier pay increase of 5.4 percent beginning January 1, 1970.

For letter carriers, this compromise came nowhere near erasing decades of pay raise promises delayed or broken, and Branch 36 members voted to reject their local leadership's endorsement of the agreement. Their outrage would be fanned in February 1970, when Nixon deferred another pay hike that had been scheduled to take effect July 1. And the tipping point came on the night of March 17, when New York carriers ended days of often boisterous debate and voted to strike, 1,555 to 1,055.

By early the next morning, picket lines had already been set up at post offices throughout New York's five boroughs, as well as northern New Jersey and neighboring Connecticut. The illegal wildcat strike was underway.

Soon, letter carriers from east to west had walked off the job. More than 200,000 letter carriers from 200 branches in 30 cities across the country eventually joined the work-stoppage, bringing the nation's mail service to a standstill.

When carriers ignored federal court orders to get back to work, President Nixon declared a national emergency and sent in the troops—nearly 25,000 to New York City post offices—in an attempt to get the mail moving again. Many letter carriers nervously watched nightly news footage of the world's best fighting force trying valiantly to deliver the Big Apple's mail. However, they gradually began to bow to intense pressure from both federal authorities and the AFL-CIO, not to mention the NALC's national leaders, and reluctantly returned to their routes.

Except for New York carriers. Branch 36 members held out the longest, only picking up their satchels again after word spread that the NALC had reached a number of significant agreements with the Nixon administration.

Even though these compromise rumors turned out to be unfounded, by March 25 the nation's mail was moving once more. Within a week, the NALC's leaders hammered out a memorandum of understanding with the Post Office Department that included both retroactive and future pay raise guarantees, the union's support for the creation of an independent Postal Service, and perhaps most importantly of all, the right to bargain collectively for letter carrier wages, benefits and working conditions.

President Emeritus Sombrotto will share his unique perspective of life on the strike line and how it changed history. Joining him as he shares his recollections will be American Postal Workers Union President William Burrus. The pair will also discuss the future of the modern Postal Service in the face of declining mail volume and threatened service cuts. The free seminar begins at 1 p.m. Eastern Time and will also stream live on the Internet at [ustream.tv/channel/national-postal-museum](http://ustream.tv/channel/national-postal-museum). ☒