

Feeling the first drops of rain



On Dec. 4, I proudly took the oath of office to serve as president of the NALC for the next four years. I vowed to work tirelessly on behalf of all letter carriers to overcome the unprecedented challenges we face. I am confident that, with your solidarity and activism, we can succeed. I want to thank you for the confidence you have placed in me and for the many messages of support I have received in recent weeks.

Our installation was held on a clear, cold night in Washington, filled with the kind of hope that comes with the strength and tradition of a great union like ours. But it occurred at the end of a week in which we felt the first unmistakable drops of rain from a coming storm for public employees.

A few days earlier, President Obama revealed the first concrete consequence of the electoral “shellacking” his party took on Nov. 2 by announcing a two-year federal employee pay freeze. That he announced it to head off a three-year freeze proposed by the incoming Republican majority in the House of Representatives did not justify its basic unfairness. It signaled a dangerous turn of events for public employees at all levels, including those employed by the United States Postal Service—even though the pay freeze does not apply to letter carriers and other postal employees.

That became evident when the so-called “national deficit commission” issued its final report the day before our installation. Co-chaired by former GOP Sen. Alan Simpson and Bill Clinton-aide-turned-investment-banker Erskine Bowles, the commission proposed a number of spending cuts aimed at federal and postal employees and reduced benefits for future Social Security recipients, even though federal employee costs and Social Security have contributed virtually nothing to the growth of the nation’s deficits and debt. (For that, 10 years of reckless tax cuts and unfunded wars, and 30 years of Wall Street deregulation, should be blamed.)

If the commission had its way, every postal employee covered by FERS or CSRS would have to pay an additional 5 to

6 percent of wages for his or her future benefits, even though the Postal Service’s pension accounts are massively overfunded. In addition, our benefit formula would be cut and our cost-of-living adjustments reduced.

The commission also endorsed the elimination of Saturday delivery after falsely calling the 2009 reduction in retiree health pre-funding from \$5.4 billion to \$1.4 billion a “taxpayer bailout” (see story on page 7).

We will fight these proposals with all our might, even as we acknowledge the need to get our country’s economic house in order. We do face a long-term deficit and debt problem, but fixing it requires immediate action on the current jobs crisis, progressive tax reform and shared sacrifice by every American.

Deficits caused by temporary stimulus spending should not be used to gut Social Security benefits, and our leaders should not ignore that our deficits are due in large measure to relentless tax-cutting that has reduced federal tax receipts (as a share of gross domestic product) to their lowest levels in more than 50 years.

Federal employees and public employees should not be made scapegoats for the deficits caused by the Great Recession. This is clearly happening today, at the state and local levels, to our brothers and sisters who serve as teachers, firefighters, police officers and civil servants. We must stand by them when they are unfairly attacked, even as we defend ourselves.

Unfortunately, the threat to letter carriers posed by deficit reduction efforts is likely to get worse before it gets better if a bipartisan tax cut deal negotiated by congressional leaders and the president is adopted in the House before the lame-duck Congress adjourns. The price for getting help to the unemployed and encouraging job growth seems to be an extension of the foolish Bush tax cuts for the rich for another two years, raising the federal deficit by \$400 billion annually.

Get out your rain gear, brother and sisters. We are in for some very nasty weather. ☒