



## MLK day speech offers 'straight talk' on unions

**F**or more than two decades, the AFL-CIO has put together a major event in January to commemorate Martin Luther King's birthday. Often held in the South, this year it was in Cincinnati, where NALC President Fredric Rolando gave a well-received speech about the status of the labor movement.

Stating that a robust labor movement is as needed as ever, Rolando offered what he called some "straight talk" about the obstacles unions face and why it is important to the country as a whole that labor overcome those obstacles, so it can help rebuild a shared prosperity. Among the hurdles are continuing high unemployment and an effort by labor's foes to divide workers by attacking public-sector employees and their unions.

"We face institutional, economic and political challenges, each daunting in its own right—and together posing a major hurdle," the NALC president said. "Yet the labor movement has no choice but to move forward and to overcome these obstacles.

"We are the lone force standing in the way of corporate domination of this country, the only mass movement standing up for the middle class and working Americans. When the other side talks about taking the country back, we know

exactly whom they want to deliver it to, and we know what this would mean for everyday Americans—for the very people you represent and those you hope to represent. Today's troubles would seem like a picnic in retrospect.

"If we, each of us, do not fight with all we have to preserve and expand the middle class, to defend the interests of ordinary Americans, who else will?

"And if the middle class continues to shrink and those who aspire to it lose hope, what kind of country will we become? One thing is clear—we will not be the inspirational nation Martin Luther King gave his life to help forge."

AFL-CIO leaders had asked Rolando to address this year's commemoration, and they said later that he delivered.

Rosalyn Pelles, director of the AFL-CIO's Civil, Human, and Women's Rights Department, called it a "great speech," citing the positive response of the 500 labor leaders and activists from across the country who gathered in Cincinnati for the event.

In his Jan. 15 remarks, President Rolando described King's various legacies, involving his efforts on behalf of civil rights, peace, equality and non-violence—and "the well-being and the dignity of those who work for a living."



Photo by Kenneth Wright, AFGE, Local 3615

**President Fredric Rolando addresses union activists at a Martin Luther King commemorative event in Cincinnati.**

"This (latter) is perhaps as good a description as any of what we in the labor movement seek to accomplish on behalf of working people throughout the country," Rolando said. "The Reverend King not only fought for these goals, tragically he died for them in Memphis. It is incumbent upon us to let neither his struggle nor his sacrifice be in vain.

"In many ways the effort to defend working people and even trade unionism itself from the mounting corporate and right-wing onslaught is the struggle of our time, just as the civil rights movement defined Dr. King's era.

"Remember, Dr. King never backed down when things were tough, he never hesitated when faced with tough odds, he never turned around when the path ahead was risky. Instead, he said—rather, he sang—"We shall not be moved." The bridge from Selma to Montgomery may have posed dangers, but Martin Luther King didn't flinch. He crossed that bridge. And so shall we. It

is incumbent upon us, my brothers and sisters, to overcome the challenges of our time."

Rolando also talked about how labor can strengthen itself. The NALC president urged labor to maintain solidarity and forge closer working ties, to expand membership and build coalitions with allies, and to communicate to the American people "why labor matters today more than ever and why a strong labor movement is in the national interest."

The AFL-CIO's Pelles, who organized this year's event, as she has for many years, said that Rolando's talk stood out because of its clear assessment of why labor remains as relevant as ever and how it can move forward.

"This was a gripping speech that was blunt in its assessment of where we stand as a labor movement and what we need to do," she said. "And President Rolando also managed to link Dr. King's efforts to our struggle and to show what we can learn from the civil rights movement." ✉

## Collins introduces FECA reform bill

**O**n Feb. 2, Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME), the ranking member of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, introduced legislation to reform the federal government's workers' compensation program.

Her bill, the Federal Workers' Compensation Reform Act of 2011, would require a "transition" to regular retirement under the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) or the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) for federal and postal employees, who receive benefits under the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA) as a result of workplace injuries, once they reach their retirement age under Social Security.

Collins has argued that workers who have been permanently disabled by their injuries and who will not return to work should not be covered indefinitely by FECA, a program designed to provide income for workers injured on the job until they recover and return to work. The senator points to some 1,000 postal employees over the age of 70 who are still receiving FECA benefits, which are greater than retirement benefits provided by CSRS and FERS.

The NALC cannot support the legisla-

tion as drafted. It makes no provision for the loss of regular retirement benefits under CSRS and FERS suffered by FECA recipients who are separated from the Postal Service—because such injured workers get no years-of-service credit over the period of their injuries once separated, and because their annuities are based on their high-3 average salaries at the time of their separation, not at the time of regular retirement.

This loss of retirement income is compounded for FECA recipients covered by CSRS, since those employees are unable to participate in the Thrift Savings Plan or to accrue benefits under Social Security—which, together, make up two-thirds of the retirement package earned by FERS employees.

"We believe that any reform of the FECA program that requires a transition to retirement must be carefully constructed to ensure a fair retirement for injured workers," NALC President Fredric V. Rolando said. "It should not punish workers for being injured in the line of duty."

"NALC is committed to working with Sen. Collins and Chairman Joe Lieberman to achieve this result should the committee take up this legislation," the president added. ✉

## Injured Iowa carrier heads home

**G**reg Kline is getting better, slowly.

The letter carrier from Bettendorf, IA, suffered serious injuries just days before Christmas after he was struck by a van while delivering the mail in Davenport. Kline is now at home and has begun intensive physical therapy sessions.

Dave Burke, president of Davenport Branch 506, said even though Kline's therapy has just started, the 23-year carrier and shop steward has "already started sniffing out grievances."

Kline, a husband and father of two girls, also said as much during his recent chat with NALC President Fredric Rolando.

Kline was struck Dec. 22 while crossing a street on his route and sustained numerous injuries and bone fractures. So severe was his condition that he had to be flown by medevac to the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics for treatment.

Donations and cards may now be sent to this new address: Greg Kline, Ascentra Credit Union, 1710 Grant Street, Bettendorf, IA 52722.

"There's still a long road ahead for him," Burke said. "For now, his family is happy to have him home." ✉