



THE STRIKE AT 40

Celebrating the Letter Carriers Who Shaped the Future

FILM CELEBRATES STRIKE ANNIVERSARY

It was 41 years ago this month, but the effects of the Great Postal Strike of 1970 are still with us.

Many NALC members remember the days before the strike, when life for letter carriers was very different from today. Before 1970, letter carriers were denied the right to collectively bargain or participate in politics. Not surprisingly, their pay, benefits and working conditions were deplorable. While many other Americans enjoyed unprecedented prosperity in the 1950s and 1960s, pay scales for letter carriers were frozen or even cut. Many letter carriers had to take second jobs to stay afloat, and some even qualified for welfare.

At the NALC Convention in Anaheim last August, President Fredric V. Rolando asked delegates who had participated in the 1970 strike to stand and be recognized. Several dozen stood up. These were the men and women who made it happen. Many of their recollections are now recorded in a documentary film, "The Strike at 40: Celebrating NALC's Heroes of 1970," which premiered at the convention.

The film includes fascinating interviews with several letter carriers from New York Branch 36, where the strike began, and others across the country who joined it. Among the letter carriers sharing their stories is a young man named Vincent Sombrotto, who would go on to serve as president of the NALC for more than two decades.

Though he held no union office at the time, Sombrotto emerged as a natural leader in the meeting of thousands of letter carriers on March 17, 1970, when the historic vote to strike happened.

"I thought we were going to win," Sombrotto recalls in the film, "and I never had a doubt about it—they were going to have to give in."

The letter carriers in that room for the strike vote knew they were risking

much more than temporary loss of pay. Their strike against the government was illegal. Unlike workers in the private sector, they had no legal right to keep their jobs after the strike ended. Instead, they might be fired or even charged with a crime.

Nevertheless, the vote was to 1,555 in favor of a walkout and 1,055 against. At midnight, the picket lines went up around post offices across Manhattan and the Bronx. Thousands of postal clerks and drivers in the New York area refused to cross the picket lines.

The mail began piling up almost immediately. The strikers defied court injunctions to return to work. Then the strike spread. Letter carriers in the rest of New York City and the surrounding area joined, followed by members across the country. By March 23, at least 200,000 letter carriers nationwide had joined the protest.

As the film shows, President Richard Nixon's attempt to keep the Post Office running by sending 25,000 National Guard troops to New York City postal facilities to case and carry mail was a major failure, as soldiers struggled to fill the shoes of experienced letter carriers.

After a week of holding firm, strikers put down their picket signs when they believed the Post Office was willing to give concessions, though no agreement had yet been reached. Round-the-clock talks yielded an agreement weeks later that included pay raises and quicker advancement in steps within grade levels. More importantly, the agreement led to an act of Congress that affirmed collective bargaining rights for letter carriers, finally ending the days of "collective begging" and beginning an era of progress in letter carrier pay, benefits and working conditions.

"The Strike at 40" can be viewed online at www.youtube.com/user/ThePostalRecord. ✉