

Who is really working for America?

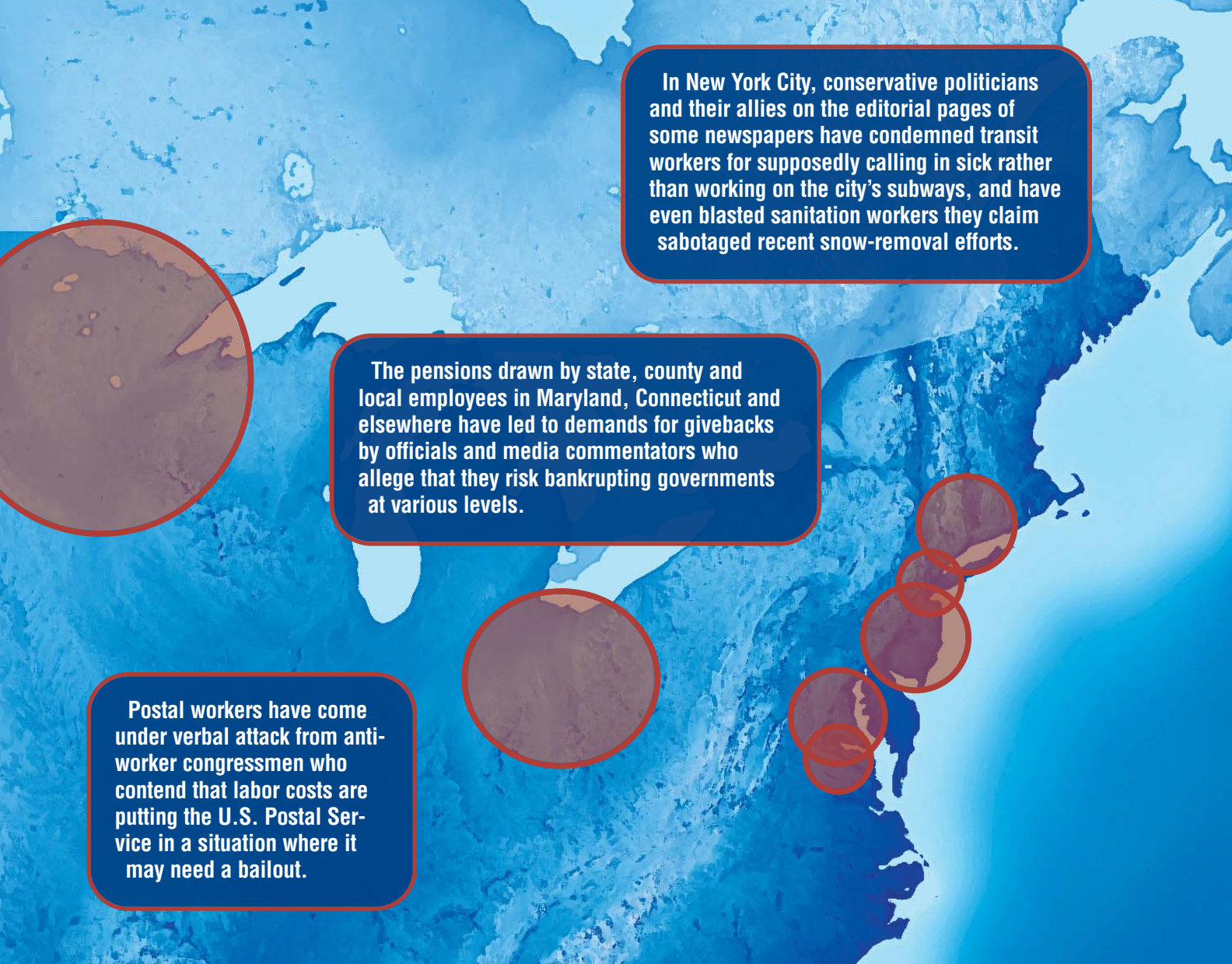
The organized attack on our public employees

A kaleidoscope of labor-related controversies across the country in recent months has put unions on the defensive. Below are a few examples. Aside from being based on unfair, misleading and often downright untrue characterizations, these anti-union campaigns have something else in common: They are all aimed at public employees and their unions.

New Jersey's governor is engaged in an increasingly vociferous offensive against state workers, while in Wisconsin the new governor seeks to strip state workers of most collective bargaining rights and threatens to call in the National Guard if employees protest. Meanwhile, Ohio's new governor wants to eliminate those same bargaining rights and also end the rights of public employees to strike.

Even once-sacrosanct police and firefighters have faced mounting calls for sacrifice, including in Oakland, CA, where some leaders said police were assuming too large a portion of the struggling city's budget and some should be laid off, notwithstanding the area's longstanding crime problem.

Teachers and their unions in Washington, DC, California and many other places have faced sharp criticism from right-wing organizations and commentators for allegedly caring more about their own careers than about student well-being, including through tenure that protects the jobs of underperforming teachers.



In New York City, conservative politicians and their allies on the editorial pages of some newspapers have condemned transit workers for supposedly calling in sick rather than working on the city's subways, and have even blasted sanitation workers they claim sabotaged recent snow-removal efforts.

The pensions drawn by state, county and local employees in Maryland, Connecticut and elsewhere have led to demands for givebacks by officials and media commentators who allege that they risk bankrupting governments at various levels.

Postal workers have come under verbal attack from anti-worker congressmen who contend that labor costs are putting the U.S. Postal Service in a situation where it may need a bailout.

Welcome to America 2011,

where those who serve our nation—protecting, educating, connecting, healing or moving it—increasingly are becoming scapegoats for a financial crisis they didn't cause and can't solve.

They present convenient targets for political and economic forces who seek to deflect blame for their own culpability in the economic breakdown or for their lax oversight that helped cause our economic problems, or to divert attention from their efforts on behalf of special interests.

But there's more to it than that. What we're witnessing is not merely a defensive ploy or a sleight-of-hand—but rather a calculated offensive meant to achieve extremist political and economic goals that would fundamentally change the country we live in.

Make no mistake—anti-worker forces are trying to exploit the economic prob-

lems, the budget crunch facing governments at all levels and the understandable public concerns by attacking government workers and their unions.

In so doing, they hope to score a twofer, blasting two of their favorite targets—government and unions—with one fell swoop. Their goals go well beyond the rhetorical:

● They hope to defund, delegitimize and shrink government, which for decades they have proclaimed doesn't offer solutions to our problems but instead *is* the problem. The fact that citizens, particularly those without vast resources of their own, will be the ones

to suffer from reduced government services is inconsequential to them.

● They aim to promote privatization and allow a strictly bottom-line orientation to dominate. In their ideal world, as corporations fill the void, public service will become a quaint notion of the past, replaced by transitory workforces.

"They can't export these jobs, as they have with the manufacturing sector, but they can certainly try to devalue them in the interest of greater profits for their corporate friends," Fredric Rolando, president of the National Association of Letter Carriers, said.

● Anti-worker forces relish the chance to weaken the labor movement by attacking the new face of unions. A little more than a year ago, public employees became the majority within the American labor movement. Though the public sector remains far smaller than the private sector, it's now unionized at a level five >



times greater. Just as Willie Sutton robbed banks because that's where the money was, anti-union ideologues are focusing their attacks on where unions are strongest.

● By focusing on issues such as “lavish” pensions and “Cadillac” health care plans enjoyed by public-sector workers, our adversaries hope to foster jealousy among private-sector workers and divide workers into warring private-sector and public-sector camps.

“Their version of class warfare is to pit private-sector workers against public servants,” says former U.S. Labor Secretary Robert Reich. “They’d rather set average working people against one another—comparing one group’s modest incomes and benefits with another group’s modest incomes and benefits—than have Americans see that the top one percent is now raking in a bigger share of national income than at any time since 1928.”

In 1976, the share of income going to the richest one percent of Americans was less than 9 percent; that has since risen about 22 percent.

● As a bonus for the anti-labor forces, such divisions and infighting would disrupt the political activities of unions and workers, reducing their role in the pivotal 2012 elections.

“We know what their political intent is,” Rolando said. “They aim to distract workers from uniting against their common foes—such as the Wall Street crew that brought our nation to the brink of economic collapse, the corporations outsourcing good American jobs, and the anti-worker politicians who facilitate such things.”

If you wonder how serious the other side is, consider the annual meeting of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) held in February in Washington DC—and just look at the title of one of the panels: “Bleeding America Dry: The Threat of Public Sector Unions.” It featured matching rhetoric.

The issues that our foes have chosen for their anti-worker campaign show just how morally and intellectually bankrupt—and hypocritical—their efforts are. When they speak of “lavish pensions,” they ignore the fact that the average state or local public employee retires after a lifetime of service with a \$19,000 annual pension—much of that resulting from his own contributions over the years. This would be a rounding error on the weekly salaries of some radio talk show hosts who thunderously denounce the benefits provided to public employees. And when they complain about public employees’ health care plans in an effort to provoke jealousy from other workers, these anti-labor forces conveniently neglect to mention that they are the loudest voices against extending health care to all Americans.

Moreover, these contracts were negotiated between two sides, and as in any collective bargaining, if workers gained in one area it’s often because they made concessions in another.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that their efforts, as dishonest and disingenuous as they may be, are bearing fruit. Repeat something often enough, and many people will eventually accept it as true. Moreover, it’s undeniable that governments at all levels are in a financial squeeze, unfunded pension obligations are a problem, sacrifices are inevitable, and even moderate politicians looking for ways to save money cannot ignore the wages and benefits of employees.

Our quarrel is not with those who responsibly seek to meet the challenges in an equitable and reasonable way. America’s public employees and their unions stand ready as partners who have helped build this country and who keep it running to seek common solutions to our problems. In fact, we already have made sacrifices. What we resist, and will continue to do so with all our might, are the ideologically



Who is really working for America?

driven efforts to single us out, demonize us and pretend that we are the source of the problems.

Labor's counter-offensive—which, unlike the attack against us, is based on the facts and not on hysteria—is taking place at the level of the AFL-CIO and individual unions, as well as in geographic areas where battles are being waged against us. In New York City, for instance, the three new and aggressive presidents of the unions representing hospital police, teachers and transit workers have quickly become the city's most visible labor leaders as they fight back.

The carrier connection

Whether we like it or not, letter carriers are front and center in this struggle.

Government employees and their unions top the target list of extremist politicians and media personalities. With anti-labor forces in control of the House of Representatives, the extreme right wing sees its opportunity.

The verbal attacks on public workers and their unions, including postal workers and the NALC, will continue despite the fact that the pay and benefits of postal employees aren't just granted by Congress like earmarks in a spending bill; they are negotiated. Public employees deserve fair pay and benefits, just as other workers do.

And the NALC has a solid history of negotiating in good faith. Nobody forces management to accept our National Agreement. While we have the option of binding arbitration in the event of an impasse, that hasn't been necessary for more than a decade.

The NALC will be lumped in with other public-sector unions despite the fact that the Postal Service isn't part of the federal budget and isn't supported by tax money. Partly due to the poor job done by the media in explaining the situation, the public doesn't understand that

the Postal Service is an independent, self-funded agency, or that the wages of postal employees come from the sale of stamps and other products and services, not from taxpayer funds.

Even some members of Congress don't seem to understand how the Postal Service works, or they prefer to intentionally mislead people. Last fall, Rep. Darrell Issa (R-CA), now the chairman of the House committee that oversees the Postal Service, jumped on the anti-government bandwagon when he called the effort to fix the pre-funding of future retiree health benefits a "bailout" by taxpayers. Issa knows full well that no one is talking about taxpayer money, and he also knows that the federal government owes the USPS up to \$75 billion that the agency has overpaid into the pension fund.

Some members of Congress have falsely claimed that arbitrators aren't required to consider the financial health of the Postal Service in their decisions—another way of blaming the unions for the fiscal ills of the agency. In fact, arbitrators always consider financial issues of the Postal Service, because they have to consider all evidence presented, and the financial state of the USPS has consistently been a topic in negotiations.

This false claim about arbitration soon popped up elsewhere. Last fall, for example, in the middle of contract negotiations with the American Postal Workers Union and the National Rural Letter Carriers' Association, the Postal Service issued a news release repeating the claim.

Other politicians have gone further. Sen. Tom Coburn (R-OK) contended that arbitrators are actually forbidden from considering the Postal Service's financial situation—a claim easily debunked by simply looking at the historical record.

This kind of rhetoric has had practical consequences. Behind-the-scenes Senate discussions led to the inclusion in postal





legislation introduced in September of a clause that would specifically require an arbitrator to consider the financial health of the USPS. This clause implied that financial considerations weren't already part of negotiations. More disturbingly, it was a call for Congress to intervene in the bargaining process.

As one of the largest and most active federal unions, the National Association of Letter Carriers is a prime target for false information and political attacks like these. The struggle to defend the rights of public-sector workers is now the struggle for the labor movement, and letter carriers are on the front line.

Just as the NALC has had to take a leadership role in saving the Postal Service from its own mismanagement and misguided solutions, such as eliminating six-day delivery, our union must take the initiative in this struggle to inform the public and their representatives of the facts and the context.

Our union's growing leadership role in the labor movement was apparent in our ability to show our strength in the 2008 presidential elections. Though many of our sister unions in the AFL-CIO have more members, NALC had more activists in the field, for a longer amount of time, than any other AFL-CIO union. We will be forced to marshal that energy once more.

The NALC, together with our fellow public-employee unions, will endeavor to make sure that the effort to scapegoat America's public servants backfires against those who would shortchange the public for their own narrow political and economic gain.

Standing tall

This is not something that can be accomplished during a single campaign cycle or during a solidarity event. Rather, it's a commitment that will be necessary not only during the next two years, but

for as long as we remain the target of anti-government and anti-labor forces.

The next two years will be vitally important as Congress weighs reform legislation for the USPS, as conservatives look to slash public-employee pay and benefits, and as the nation prepares for another national election. The NALC will stand strong, as it always has, against those who seek to dismantle the Postal Service; in that effort, it will be up to the members to carry the torch.

It all starts with being engaged in NALC's three-part legislative field plan. The first component involves contributing to COLCPE, the union's political action fund. A strong COLCPE fund allows NALC to give support to friends of letter carriers in Congress, who in turn will speak up for us against those who would go after our pay and benefits while attacking the Postal Service. COLCPE also finances the release of carriers to work on political campaigns throughout the country. (*See the February issue of The Postal Record or nalc.org on how to donate to COLCPE.*)

Next is signing up as an e-Activist. By providing NALC your e-mail address, we can contact you at a moment's notice, so you can send an e-mail or call your member of Congress when legislation is up for a vote. (*See the NALC website for information on becoming an e-Activist.*)

The third component is to join the Carrier Corps. The NALC soon will announce its updated program for turning carriers into activists through calls to attend political rallies, to join phone banking and canvassing efforts, and to volunteer for campaigns. As the nation shifts its attention to the 2012 presidential election, NALC will again have to stand as one of the strongest unions in the country to make the voice of working people heard. (*Look for information on the revamped Carrier Corps program in a future issue of The Postal Record.*)



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Thanks to a Supreme Court decision in 2010, corporations can now spend unlimited money in elections—meaning more right-wing attack ads on our television and radio stations. Union strength will be necessary to counter that message, not through outspending our adversaries but rather through better use of resources—including our activists. We'll need union boots on the ground, going door to door to make sure labor turns out for those who will give workers a voice.

It's going to be quite a struggle for control of Congress and the White House in 2012, and it's vitally important for our elected leaders to be friends of letter carriers. Our pay and benefits, as well as the status of our employer, are legislated by Congress. In this sense, even if we are a self-sufficient agency whose funding does not come from taxpayers, we are as vulnerable to the whims of Washington as is any group of public employees. If postal reform becomes an opportunity for extremists to damage the Postal Service, we will need friends in Congress and the White House who will listen to our concerns.

But the coming elections are not the only place we must make our voice heard. We need to constantly try to influence public opinion—and we must think broadly when we do so, both in terms of defending all public employees and how we make our arguments. Rather than simply arguing on behalf of letter carriers or government workers as a whole, we need to show others why their interests are involved. Competent agencies and dedicated public employees are an important element in a strong country that works well for all its citizens.

Whenever we hear someone complaining about overpaid teachers or government workers or the “anachronistic” Postal Service, it's up to all of us to be the voice of reason, cutting through the propaganda. And we must also engage the media when they do the same. If

you see something in your local paper, write a letter to the editor, giving them the other side. Often journalists and editors just don't have the time to research all of the facts and will be grateful to get another viewpoint. If you would like assistance, contact the Communications and Media Relations Department at NALC Headquarters. If you'd like, we'll deal directly with the media outlet.

Letter carriers are linked with the other public employees—firefighters, teachers, police officers, nurses—as the face of those who strive to protect, educate, heal, secure and connect the American public. Our work is in the national interest. And, as letter carriers, we bring important strengths to this task—not only are we out in communities across the country six days a week, we have been the most trusted federal workers six years in a row.

“We have to help lead the way,” NALC President Rolando said. “This is essential not just for our own jobs and our own future, but for the future of the American labor movement and for the middle class in this country. The struggle by letter carriers to defend our own jobs, pay and working conditions mirrors the struggle of the whole union movement—and we have the cohesion, the unity and the strength to not only win the former battle but to help to shape the outcome of labor's broader effort.”

If we don't all stand together and fight for what we believe in as dedicated public servants, those who seek to dismantle government and privatize wherever they can will have an easier time of it. And who will gain from tearing down our public institutions and employees? Whoever it is, it sure isn't the American public, and it sure isn't those who serve the public. ☐

For more information on our fight to save six-day delivery, go to nalc.org. For more on what the AFL-CIO is doing to help direct the fight against public employees, check out its new “States of Denial” website at afl-cio.org/issues/states.

