



President Rolando

talks contract negotiations, saving America's Postal Service

at Rap Session

The critical imperative to save America's Postal Service was a theme that ran through just about every aspect of the NALC's 2011 National Rap Session in Las Vegas Oct. 13-15, from discussions of ongoing contract negotiations to our attempts to influence the legislative process.

"As we get ready to bargain for a new contract in the worst economy in 80 years, and as we weather attacks from every angle imaginable, we have an urgent need to come together right now and plan our strategy for the future," NALC President Fredric Rolando said.

The *NALC Constitution* calls for the union to hold a national meeting, better known as a "rap session," in the odd-numbered years between biennial national conventions. This year, more than 1,500 branch and state leaders from all over the country gathered at the Planet Hollywood hotel for a weekend of workshops and discussions about the present and future of the Postal Service.

A manufactured crisis

"Letter carriers are out in force all across America telling the truth about

the Postal Service," Rolando said to begin his keynote address on Oct. 16.

"We've met with President Obama, Vice President Biden, Senate Majority Leader Reid, Labor Secretary Hilda Solis, leaders in the House and Senate Democratic caucuses and White House staff," he said. "We rallied in every congressional district on Sept. 27. (*See story, page 8.*)

"We've been on TV, the radio, in newspapers—and we've even made a commercial," he said, pausing to show the 30-second ad on the screens in the auditorium. "And we'll be doing more of that."

"Our message is this: That the truth is the Postal Service's cash crisis is a manufactured crisis, an excuse for our critics who would rather dismantle our business than grow it."

Rolando briefly outlined the 2006 postal reform mandate that has brought the Postal Service to its knees, through the overly aggressive and unique pre-funding of retiree health benefits.

"No other federal agency or company is required to do this," he said. "And



among the companies that voluntarily do it, their average account balance is much lower than ours.”

The sensible things to do, he said, would be to stop making the pre-funding payments, replenish USPS’ borrowing authority with the Treasury, replenish the savings and allow the current \$45 billion in pre-funding to stand.

“Once the USPS is profitable again,” Rolando said, “we can resume a more reasonable pre-funding schedule.”

One important message that shouldn’t get lost in the debate over finances, Rolando said, is the value of the Postal Service’s universal delivery network. “We deliver the mail to 150 million addresses, six days a week,” he said. “We’ve been the most trusted federal agency for six years in a row. We have the cheapest postage in the world. We deliver 40 percent of the world’s mail. We’re at the center of a \$1.3 trillion mailing industry that supports between 8 million and 9 million jobs.

“Our network truly binds this nation together,” he said. “We’re in every neighborhood, and we often double as police officers, firefighters and finders of lost children.

“There is no other comparable network in the U.S.,” he said.

Our issues

“Most of us are facing probably the worst atmosphere ever on the work-room floor,” the president said. “And we’re entering collective bargaining in the worst economy in 80 years.

We’re dealing with excessing, he said, plus withholding, Carrier Optimal Routing issues, fixed start times and so-called “windows of operation,” new Flats Sorting Systems and numerous ongoing contract violations.

“And yet, these are the least of our problems,” Rolando said.

The big problem is that the Postal Service has no cash, and worse yet, no vision for the future.



“[Management’s] response? To attack workers, dismantle the service, attack collective bargaining, push for layoffs and slash benefits,” he said. “We’re trying to negotiate with a badly misguided employer in the worst economy in 80 years.”

The NALC is also up against a Bush-appointed majority on the Postal Board of Governors, he said, plus an Office of Personnel Management that refuses to correct the pension overpayment problem, a media that is more interested in theater than facts, and a White House that has reversed its earlier position and now embraces five-day mail delivery.

“And we have a dysfunctional Congress,” he said, “where evil flourishes while good languishes, and to get anything done in the Senate requires a filibuster-proof 60 votes instead of a simple majority.”

There is some good and some bad coming out of the Senate, he said. “We supported some of [Sen. Tom] Carper’s bill,” Rolando said, “although thanks to the GAO report that he requested, he now shows signs of giving up on the overfunding issue.”



Opposite page: NALC President Fredric Rolando (top) led the rap session discussion for the more than 1,500 union leaders and activists in attendance.

Top: Rolando thanks the NALC members for their help in the Save America’s Postal Service campaign, and calls on their help as the campaign moves on to the next step.

Above: Three former NALC presidents showed their solidarity with Rolando and the union at this time of crisis, by speaking to the attendees. Pictured are (seated, l-r) James Rademacher (1968-1977), William Young (2002-2009) and Vincent Sombrotto (1979-2002).



Workshops

Several workshops were offered throughout the day on Oct. 15. Executive Vice President Tim O'Malley, Vice President George Mignosi and Director of Safety and Health Manuel Peralta Jr. facilitated a discussion of a number of local and national contract issues that have been grieved and/or resolved since the 2010 Convention in Anaheim. Next door, Director of City Delivery Lew Drass and members of the Contract Administration Unit conducted a competition designed to increase members' knowledge of the new *NALC Letter Carrier Resource Guide*.

NALC Chief of Staff Jim Sauber and research staffer Stephen DeMatteo conducted a workshop on the postal financial crisis (pictured above), while nearby, Secretary-Treasurer Jane Broendel and Assistant Secretary-Treasurer Nicole Rhine went over the nuts and bolts of branch financial management and branch bylaws.

Director of Retired Members Ernie Kirkland helped a number of attendees gain a better understanding of the value of retirement planning. Legislative Director Jennifer Warburton and Director of Communications and Media Relations Philip Dine held a session designed to brief members on the NALC's legislative and media strategies.

Consultant Ron Watson also was on hand to train the union's regional administrative assistants on workers' compensation issues that letter carriers continue to face.

Workshops were repeated in the afternoon to give as many activists as possible a chance to maximize their exposure to the topics presented.

Sen. Max Baucus' recently introduced bill more or less mirrors the House of Representatives measure introduced by Rep. Stephen Lynch in the spring, the president said, with added protection for rural post offices.

And in a recent development, Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders is working with NALC to introduce a bill that would address many of NALC's concerns, Rolando said.

But over in the House, the Postal Service is up against an anti-worker and anti-government majority, he said.

"Congressman Lynch is still a friend," he said, "and we now have a bipartisan majority of 225 House members on H.R. 1351, thanks to you.

"But then there's Congressman [Darrell] Issa's 'postal destruction act,'" Rolando said, which brought a chorus of boos from the assembly. "It has two co-sponsors, yet it's out of committee and on its way to the House floor." (*See story, page 8.*)

There is some hope in the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction—the so-called "super committee," he said. "Getting six-day mail delivery attached to its deficit reduction plan or getting a continuing [budget] resolution that further defers our pre-funding obligation are our only hopes for true postal relief this year."

But the super committee is a double-edged sword, he said. "Access to our own money should be enough, but thanks to President Obama's proposal, five-day [mail delivery] is also on the table.

"We need to let the super committee know that people and businesses think eliminating six-day delivery is wrong."

The next phase

"So what's next?" Rolando asked. "We want to continue to build off [the Sept.

27] rallies to take our message to the American people and deliver a strong message to Congress that America wants and deserves first-rate service six days a week."

With that, President Rolando announced that the NALC is launching a national petition drive.

The plan is to gather signatures amounting to 10 times your branch's size—for example, a branch of 500 would collect 5,000 signatures.

"We need to get all members of the branch involved," Rolando said. "Do it at the post office on your day off—or if you're a retiree, whenever you want."

He encouraged members to gather support from central labor councils, family members, at Sunday schools, malls and sports arenas.

"Each branch has until November 14," he said, "to organize events in high-profile areas and to recruit carriers to canvass neighborhoods."

The NALC's Department of Legislative and Political Affairs will track branch collection figures and send petitions to the appropriate congressional office, he said.

Then, NALC will place ads in major newspapers and on super committee members' home turf, announcing the number of signatures that we've collected. ([See nalc.org](http://nalc.org) for complete details.)

The bargaining environment

Rolando then turned to an update on the talks toward a new collective-bargaining agreement, which he kept brief due to the sensitive nature of the ongoing discussions. (The current agreement expires at midnight on Nov. 20.)

"Some things must exist in the next agreement," he said. "We have no interest in diminishing the everyday value of the contributions of the men and women who deliver the mail. They deserve to be rewarded."

Also, the transitional workforce needs a bridge to career positions, he said.

He said that the union has proposed a Saturday-only workforce before. "We can work to make deliveries on Saturday cheaper without eliminating it outright."

We must also maintain a ban on contracting out letter-carrier work, he said.

"And we need to get supervisors off letter carriers' backs," he said. "Call off the dogs!"

NALC has taken the dramatic step of calling on experts to examine and pursue alternative business strategies, Rolando said. He announced that the NALC had retained the services of restructuring expert Ron Bloom and the financial advisory firm Lazard to help the NALC guide the Postal Service away from its plans to dismantle itself.

Bloom recently left the Obama administration, where he served as special assistant to the president on manufacturing policy and helped save the U.S. auto industry. He had previously worked both on Wall Street and for the United Steelworkers and SEIU, and played a major role in the restructuring of the steel and airline industries. Lazard is a sizable New York-based investment bank with a long history of working with large, unionized companies.

Rolando called Bloom to the podium for a few remarks.

"Whether you like it or not," Bloom said, "the future of the USPS is in your hands. Who knows more about the USPS than you do?" He called on letter carriers to "embrace the challenge of revitalizing the enterprise."

He vowed to do all he could to help the NALC save America's Postal Service.

Rolando concluded that while he's willing to work with management to build a stronger Postal Service, he would not back down if pressed to help dismantle the USPS. "We are prepared to go to arbitration if necessary," he said.

Q and A

Before the rap session concluded, Rolando touched on a number of issues

that members still face and took questions and comments from dozens of delegates about flats sorting, route inspections, excessing and withholding, plus contract delivery service and capturing new deliveries.

Also discussed were Delivery Unit Optimizations (DUOs), where the Postal Service moves individual letter carriers or entire zones to another installation. The NALC continues to work on memos to cover seniority issues, as well as other practical options for handling such moves.

Rolando noted the progress made on the National Reassessment Program's case backlog, noting how the success in dealing with this problem will help encourage bringing in a special corps of advocates to deal with other key issues.

"There's been no discussion of early-outs," Rolando said, "but that could all change tomorrow morning." He noted that early-outs with incentives require union involvement, but those without incentives merely need OPM's approval.

And he encouraged branches experiencing a backlog on local grievances to seek help from their national business agent's office.

Immediate concerns

"We face many battles, but the last thing we need to be doing is battling each other," Rolando said. "All of you are leaders, so make sure you treat each member's issue like it's your own and deal with it."

"Our strength is in our members and our solidarity," he continued. "There is no way we can do what we do without the support we get from the members of this union."

"We are 280,000 strong," he said. "We have the history, the vision, the focus and the solidarity—and we damn well better have each others' backs!"

"Together, we are going to succeed and preserve the Postal Service in spite of itself, thanks to the integrity of the men and women of the NALC." ☒



Top: Consultant Ron Bloom said that he'd bring his experience to the fight to save America's Postal Service.

Above: Attendees had the opportunity to ask questions of the NALC president.