



Tough times

“This is the most difficult time in history to be a letter carrier.” That is currently the sentiment expressed on many workroom floors and at many branch meetings.

In the 1800s, letter carriers were expected to work 365 days a year, 10 to 12 hours a day, without any vacation. Surely those letter carriers thought it was the most difficult time. Carriers from New York, Chicago, Omaha, Buffalo and Brooklyn joined together with the Noble Order of the Knights of Labor (K of L), which was the largest and one of the most important American labor organizations of the day. Carriers formed locals within that organization and took on leadership roles. However, the Post Office Department retaliated by firing organizers for minor infractions and, in New York City, 150 letter carriers were suspended when the postmaster discovered they were members of the K of L. The carriers were nonetheless persistent and, with the help of Ohio Rep. Samuel S. Cox, Congress passed the eight-hour bill for carriers.

Letter carriers of 1920 certainly worked in a difficult era, as they had no retirement benefits. Carriers were forced to work later in life and were pushed out of the job when they couldn't keep up. Letter carriers pressed for relief from Congress, which led to the Civil Service Retirement Act that allowed carriers to retire at age 65 with an annuity.

Letter carriers had a particularly difficult time making ends meet during President Eisenhower's eight years in office. When Congress passed a postal pay bill in 1954, Ike vetoed it. Again in May 1955, Congress passed a pay raise for postal workers and President Eisenhower vetoed it. Finally, that same summer, a pay bill was signed into law. That was the first pay raise in four years for letter carriers and it put a letter carrier's annual salary at \$4,400, while the average American family earned \$5,520 a year.

In 1957, Eisenhower vetoed another postal pay bill. He did sign a pay bill in 1959, but vetoed another in 1960. The NALC lobbied fiercely for a veto override of the 1960 pay bill and was successful. That override was one of only two

overrides of President Eisenhower's 169 vetoes in his eight-year tenure.

Despite numerous political victories, letter carrier pay still lagged behind other working-class Americans, and throughout the '60s, many carriers needed to work second jobs. In addition, many spouses needed to find work long before it was commonplace to do so. The tough times of that era created the perfect storm that led to the strike of 1970. The result of that strike moved us from collective begging to collective bargaining. The actions and sacrifices of our brothers and sisters in 1970 involved great risk and uncertainty. Loss of pay, loss of job and threat of arrest were all on the table for those who participated in the strike. They stood together, took action and made the sacrifices, and every postal worker between that time and now has reaped the benefits of their efforts.

Now, even as we face declining mail volume, a labor-unfriendly Congress, and USPS management without a plan, we *do* have fair wages, including a cost-of-living adjustment. We *do* have job protection; not a single career letter carrier has been laid off. Career employees *do* have a pension at the end of the day, whether it's the Federal Employee Retirement System or the Civil Service Retirement System.

We can get through today's tough times, if we all do our part. Eight percent of our members have signed up as automatic contributors to the Committee on Letter Carrier Political Education (COLCPE)—*8 percent!* What if only 8 percent joined efforts together when letter carriers fought for time off and an eight-hour day? What if only 8 percent of the membership acted toward lobbying for a pension? What if only 8 percent fought for better wages after World War II, or if only 8 percent of the carriers went on strike?

It's our turn to act. The wolf is at the door. Don't put it off any longer. NALC personnel will be stationed at the NALC rap session this month to sign up new contributors. If you are not attending the rap session, contact your branch president or NBA to sign up as an automatic contributor to COLCPE. ✉