

Solidarity in crunch time



We all know that you find out who your true friends are when times are tough. Over the past four years, we have experienced the worst economic circumstances since the Great Depression and the most challenging crisis for the NALC since the Great Postal Strike of 1970. We are saddled with a senior management team that seems hell-bent on dismantling the Postal Service and a dysfunctional Congress (approval rating: 11 percent) that refuses to reverse pension and retiree health policies that are strangling the Postal Service.

Indeed, the postmaster general has even recently used an outrageous talking point favored by the most anti-government ideologues in Congress, by comparing the financial situation of the Postal Service to that facing the country of Greece. Not only is the analogy all wrong—the pre-funding mandate passed by Congress in 2006 caused the current postal debt crisis, not irresponsibility by USPS or its employees—but it also is extremely damaging to the Postal Service's prospects for recovery. A postmaster general who maligns his own employees risks losing the confidence of those employees. Worse, he risks driving customers away at a time when we should be looking for new ways to serve them.

So it's a good time to take stock and to recognize who our true friends are. At the top of the list has been the American labor movement. This week I huddled with the leaders of the 57 unions that belong to the AFL-CIO to address the problems facing our country and its workers.

I took the opportunity to make a presentation, with the president of the APWU, to our colleagues on the federation's Executive Council concerning the crisis facing workers employed by the U.S. Postal Service. We explained the origins of the crisis, outlined the numerous legislative proposals and threats and presented the various TV and print ads we have run in targeted media markets over the past six months. We also reviewed our grassroots mobilization strategy and the lobbying strategy we have pursued in search of comprehensive postal reform. And we thanked the AFL-CIO's leadership for actively advancing our priorities with Congress and the Obama administration.

The response from the unions was overwhelmingly supportive. Many union presidents offered to run stories in their publications and on their websites and to use their activists to support our agenda. We announced that we would stage a national day of action in April (date to be announced after this issue goes to press) aimed at members of the U.S. Senate, and invited all the unions to participate. The solidarity of the labor movement is essential to our success.

Sen. Bernie Sanders (D-VT) is also among the NALC's legislative friends. He has led a coalition of 27 Democratic senators who are trying to improve the 21st Century Postal Service Act of 2012 (S. 1789), a bill that could go to the floor of the Senate at any time. During the AFL-CIO meetings, we were in contact with Sen. Sanders and other Senate leaders, working to find sensible solutions to the problems facing the Postal Service.

Independently, Sanders and a number of Senate leaders have contacted NALC consultant Ron Bloom, who is working with the Lazard investment bank to investigate alternative business strategies and models that might help the Postal Service thrive. It is too early in their investigation to know definitively what all the options might be, but we believe the Postal Service must have a growth strategy to survive. We cannot simply downsize our way to health, and the NALC will continue to resist this destructive strategy.

At its Executive Council meeting in March, the AFL-CIO voted to endorse President Obama for re-election. The president earned the endorsement because he clearly has been a friend to working families over the past three years—he rescued the auto industry, he fought to prevent a second Great Depression and helped turn the economy around while extending health insurance to more than 30 million uninsured Americans.

In our case, the president's postal policies have not lived up to our hopes and expectations, but we will follow our practice in 2008 and decide at the National Convention in Minneapolis whether to give him NALC's endorsement. We hope he will work to earn our fervent support in the weeks ahead when postal reform legislation rises to the top of the national agenda. ☒