



Hostile territory

Stories from
NALC
members
on the
frontlines
of the
union
movement

In many parts of the country, it's a tough time to be a union member.

Hostility toward organized labor has always simmered in some regions, but it has boiled over in the last few years with the poor economy. Politicians in several states have tried openly to weaken or destroy unions, and even Postal Service management has directly attacked our own collective-bargaining rights.

Letter carriers haven't taken this lying down. We have marched, written letters, made phone calls, collected signatures, donated to COLCPE and talked to our patrons and neighbors. We've advocated for our own jobs and worked in solidarity to help our brothers and sisters in other unions. That grassroots activism, bolstered by our daily contact with people while making our rounds—puts us front and center in the labor struggle. And it gives some of us a firsthand view of the interesting attitudes—good and bad—that some people have about unions and government workers.

Discussions about unions can pop up anywhere at any time—on a route, at a rally, in the grocery store or at a family reunion. Greg White, NALC state chairman for

Mississippi—a state with rampant hostility to labor—runs into the issue frequently.

White once heard a minister preach that unions were “an abomination before God.” Referring to scripture, the minister declared that “slaves should be loyal to their masters.”

Released to go door to door in support of a Democratic Senate candidate, White was cursed, his car was vandalized and he was threatened with dogs and guns.

When patrons at a doctor's office learned that he was a union activist, they treated him in a less friendly fashion. They would chide him about postage increases, saying, “Well, I guess we have to pay those union workers more money.”

White chalks up these experiences to deeply held views rooted in the state's agrarian and highly conservative history and culture. “In Mississippi, you're supposed to be grateful you have a job,” White said. He sometimes hears negative comments from fellow postal workers—some of them even union members themselves. “All the union does is keep sorry people from getting fired,” they tell him.

The prejudice against unions is fed by misinformation as much as by culture. At a

birthday barbecue for his daughter, a neighbor asked White what a typical carrier earns, and White told him. “But Rush Limbaugh says you guys make \$100K a year,” the neighbor replied.

White’s experience may be extreme, but it isn’t unique.

Ohio state chairman John Dyce, a member of Youngstown, OH Branch 385, thinks it’s all about geography. While many cities in his state are factory towns whose residents appreciate unions, people in his tiny community in Eastern Ohio, which hugs the edge of the Appalachian Mountains, harbor misunderstanding and contempt for union workers, especially government workers.

“They just talk like we’re lazy and paid a lot of money for doing nothing,” he said. “Many had a perception that union government workers don’t do anything for a living.”

Feeding the sentiment is the fact that, given the unemployment and wage stagnation among non-union laborers, especially in rural regions, union workers often are the highest-paid workers in an area like Dyce’s. Sometimes when he tells people where his home is located, Dyce said, they respond with, “Oh, you live where all the money is.”

Unfortunately, many low-paid workers don’t take the logical leap in thought—instead of trying to bring down fairly paid workers, they should unionize to bring up their own pay. But a strong cultural bias against unions, and a belief that unions reduce employment, keep many low-wage workers from making that connection.

As with White’s encounters with hostility during outreach efforts to the public in his state, Dyce encountered negative attitudes when he was collecting signatures to help defeat S.B. 5, a law passed by the Ohio legislature with the support of Republican Gov. John Kasich that curbed collective-bargaining rights for 360,000 public employees in the state. Last year, volunteers from a coalition of unions and other groups, including Dyce, got an initiative on the state ballot to allow the voters to repeal S.B. 5. They did this by collecting 1.3 million signatures—a million more than required.

Though their efforts statewide broke the Ohio record for signatures gathered for an initiative, Dyce struggled to get many from his region. “In this county, a

good day would be getting one out of three people to sign.”

Nevertheless, Ohio voters supported the initiative handily last fall, handing Kasich and anti-union forces in the state a stunning defeat.

On the other hand, letter carriers in other parts of the country report that they are insulated from anti-union feelings in their states. In some places, the public views letter carriers differently from other public or union employees, perhaps because people have a personal relationship with their letter carrier or see him or her on the job each day.

In Indiana, the site of a recent battle over a “right to work” law, Crown Point, IN Branch 1624 President Sharon Patterson said that most people don’t even realize letter carriers are represented by a union, let alone hold it against them. “For the most part, we’ve gotten positive comments,” she said. “We have a good public image. Most people look forward to seeing us.”

Scott van Derven, Milwaukee Branch 2 member and Wisconsin state chairman, also hasn’t seen the hostility toward unionized government employees stick to letter carriers. Wisconsin is the center of the current struggle for public employee rights. Union workers, including letter carriers, fought hard against Republican Gov. Scott Walker’s law stripping most state workers of collective-bargaining rights, and have led the effort to recall Walker by collecting nearly a million signatures for a recall petition. The election to decide Walker’s fate is set for June 5, when voters will choose between Walker and Democrat Tom Barrett.

“We’re still just the mailman to a lot of people,” van Derven said. Many people forget, he said, that letter carriers also are public workers. “Your letter carrier is delivering, so you know he’s doing a good job.” In Wisconsin, the concerns focus more on post office closings.

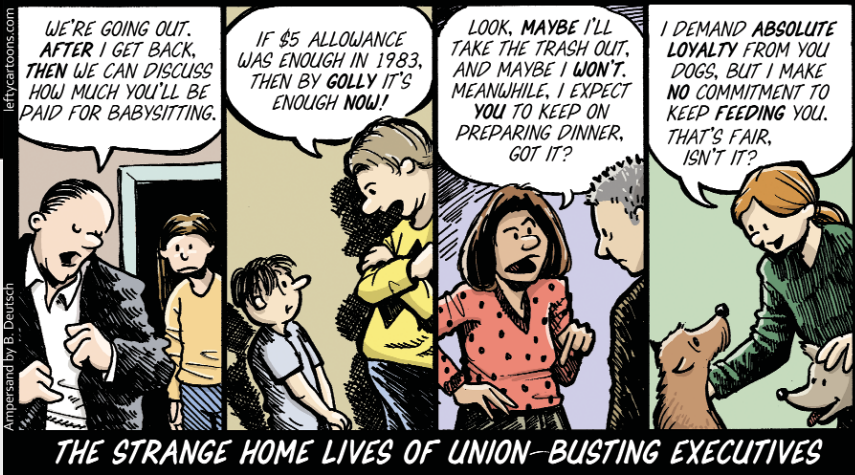
“We have a bit of a bubble.”

Next door in Minnesota, a move was afoot this spring to put a state constitutional amendment on the ballot that



Mississippi State Association President Greg White





Minneapolis Branch 9 member
Samantha Hartwig

would make Minnesota a “right to work” state. So far, the amendment has failed to come to a vote in the Minnesota House of Representatives, thanks in part to several Republicans who have joined Democrats in opposing it. Supporters are trying to get a constitutional amendment because they know that Gov. Mark Dayton, a Democrat, would veto a right-to-work law, said Samantha Hartwig of Minneapolis Branch 9, an active Carrier Corps member. A constitutional amendment could not be vetoed.

Working on a phone bank to call members of other unions in Minnesota to urge them to oppose the amendment, Hartwig heard an eye-opening comment when she identified herself as a government employee. “You public workers don’t need a union,” a member of a private-sector union told her.

“That surprised me,” she said, “because to me, ‘union’ is private and public employees working together.”

Her patrons, on the other hand, appreciate her union because she tells them how NALC members are working to preserve the Postal Service.

“People on my route know I do a lot of union stuff. I’m educating them about what the union is doing for the Postal Service,” she said. People come to her on her lunch break and ask her about issues like Saturday delivery. “I’ve never heard negative feedback.”

Letter carriers in South Carolina are getting used to hearing particularly hostile anti-union tirades from their governor, Republican Nikki Haley.

“I love that we are one of the least unionized states in the country,” Haley said in her Jan. 18 “state of the state” speech. Haley talked about unions as if they were sinister and treacherous: “Unions thrive in the dark,” she said. “Secrecy is their greatest ally.”

After a dispute with the National Labor Relations Board over Boeing’s

decision to build a plant in her state, Haley called the NLRB a “rogue agency” and endorsed disbanding it. The NLRB had investigated whether Boeing was moving jobs to South Carolina to retaliate against a union for strikes at the company’s plants in Washington state.

“We’ll make the unions understand full well that they are not needed, not wanted, and not welcome in the state of South Carolina!” Haley declared in her speech.

“She is not going to get us to leave,” said South Carolina State Chairwoman Emily Lane. Lane, a member of Greer, SC Branch 2553, said Haley does not respond to any communications from NALC or union letter carriers—no replies to letters, no phone calls returned.

Lane’s experience with the people of South Carolina, on the other hand, is the opposite. “Everybody loves their letter carrier,” she said. “They don’t care if they’re union or not.” Patrons are more likely to complain about the price of stamps, she said.

“It’s not so much about being union with the public—but it is with Nikki Haley.”

A few hundred miles west, living in a factory town in the middle of hostile territory has given Birmingham, AL Branch 530 President Antonia Shields a chance to learn how non-union workers think and see how anti-union attitudes hurt them. She sees it with her close friend’s experience as an auto worker at a non-union plant, one of several the state has attracted in part because of lower labor costs. “The company has been good to me” is the refrain she hears from auto workers, but how much is that worth in the long run?

“Y’all don’t have the benefits and the protections,” she tells her friend. “You don’t have anybody fighting for you. You don’t have a voice.”

In Mississippi, where the median household income of \$37,985 ranks last among the 50 states, letter carriers are well off by comparison—and that can breed resentment, White said. “You hear comments all the time,” he said. “‘You’re making all that money; you’re going to have a great retirement.’”

White responds by telling workers to bring themselves up instead of pulling him down. “Don’t fault me because my union makes sure I have a good wage,” he says. “If y’all would organize, you could do better too.” ☒