



As craft shrinks, “Don’t mourn—organize!”

I’ve just completed my report to NALC’s 68th Biennial Convention in Minneapolis in July, and since only a relatively small percentage of our members will be in attendance, I decided to give a sneak preview of one section of my report—the most troublesome, quite frankly.

The NALC is shrinking, both because there aren’t as many letter carriers now as there used to be *and* because some of our branches aren’t organizing as effectively as they have in the past.

Since spring 2008, total membership has steadily decreased, as the number of *active* letter carriers has shrunk dramatically. As of March 23, 2012, total membership was 270,015, a level last reached in 1985. To put this more starkly: NALC’s membership gains of the last 27 years have been reversed—a development even more disturbing when we recognize that while in 1985, only 26 percent of the membership was retired and thus not paying full dues; today close to one-third of the membership is retired. In fact, spring 1980 was the last time the union’s *active* membership was as low as the March 23 total of 180,875.

The major reason for this precipitous drop in membership is clear: Letter carriers are leaving the Postal Service and are not being replaced. Between Accounting Period (AP) 5 of 2008 and AP 5 of 2012, the city carrier *craft* shrunk from 231,456 to 193,538—a decrease of 37,918 or 16.4 percent in just four years. As a result, the number of active city carrier *members* of the NALC also declined dramatically during these same four years, a decrease of 34,570 active city carriers members—from 211,738 to 177,168 or 16.3 percent.

At best, the shrinkage of the letter carrier craft can only be slowed, not stopped. But what can and should be reversed is the decrease in the union’s organizing percentage that has occurred in the last two years. Two years ago, 92.4 percent of the city carrier craft belonged to the NALC, but as of March 1, that percentage has dropped more than a full point—to 91.2 percent.

Two parallel trends contribute to this decline in organizing. First, the percentage of *career* carriers belonging

to the NALC *decreased* in the last two years and, as of March 1, was at 93 percent. Second, the percentage of transitional employees (TEs) belonging to the NALC also has declined. In PP8 of 2007, the Postal Service started hiring TEs in large numbers, the total number fluctuating during the past two years between 12,500 and 13,500, and thus comprising a growing percentage of the city carrier workforce. Unfortunately, however, the union’s positive results in organizing TEs has reversed itself. The percentage of TEs belonging to the union had increased from the low 60s in 2008 to almost 78 percent in 2010, but as of March 2012 had dropped to 72.9 percent. Since the Postal Service is highly unlikely to increase the number of career carriers in the near future, it is vital that we do everything possible to sign up the existing TEs and new TEs as they are hired.

The union’s loss of members would be even larger if it were not for the continued retention of retired members, now comprising 33 percent of the total membership, compared with 28.4 percent four years ago. This has significant financial and leadership implications for the union at both the local and national levels.

It is unclear whether there will ever be another extended period of membership growth and, if so, when this might occur. The continued introduction of automation as well as the strong probability there will not be a renewed growth in mail volume, especially letter mail, suggests that both the national union and our branches should not expect a turnabout in the membership trends in the near future. And although an unabated increase in the number of delivery points over the years acted as a brake on any concerted effort by management to downsize the craft, this may no longer be the case, if management prevails in its reckless effort to expand cluster-box delivery and reduce mail delivery to five days a week.

Regardless of what happens to mail volume and whether Congress acts responsibly to stop postal management from destroying *our* employer, the bottom line is that in an environment where it is impossible to predict the size of the craft, it is essential that organizing continue to play a major role in the life of the NALC at all levels. ☒