

The federal shutdown was a crisis of democracy



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It may be time to amend the unofficial motto of the U.S. Postal Service: “Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night **nor government shutdown** stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.”

As I write this, the shutdown is still in effect and debate fills the halls of Congress as to whether there will be a deal to raise the debt limit. By the time you read this, the situation will likely have been resolved, though the root of the problems in our nation’s capital must be dealt with.

Since we receive no taxpayer appropriations, we were spared the fate of 800,000 federal employees who were furloughed

when Congress failed to enact a budget or pass a continuing resolution (CR) to fund the federal government by Oct. 1. The mail has been delivered and letter carriers continue to be paid. For that we can be thankful—even as we decry the totally unjustified lockout of our brothers and sisters employed by the federal government.

But let’s not kid ourselves. The fiasco in Washington is doing serious damage to the U.S. economy and could jeopardize the Postal Service’s fragile recovery. Millions of private-sector workers whose companies rely on federal contracts or who provide services associated with federal activities (think of all the small businesses that operate near military bases or national parks) have lost income. Consumer confidence has plunged—as deeply as when Lehman Brothers collapsed in 2008. To the damage caused by mindless sequestration earlier this year, the Congress has now added a government shutdown and a threat to default on the national debt.

A default would be devastating for letter carriers—the resulting recession would threaten our jobs and, in the short term, delay our paychecks. (The Treasury told the Postal Service in October that access to the postal funds used to meet payroll and to pay vendors could be disrupted by a default).

It is not only a disgrace; it’s embarrassing. I am at a loss to explain how this could happen. The easy answer is to blame the extremism of politicians like Sen. Ted Cruz and the incompetence of GOP leaders. After all, it was Cruz who decided it was a good idea to close the government down and threaten a debt default to try to repeal the Affordable Care Act. We just had an election about that issue—the guy who wanted to repeal

the law, Mitt Romney, lost. Political extortion is certainly easier than doing the hard work of democracy—winning elections and passing a new law to repeal ones you don’t like—but it’s wrong.

Meanwhile, Republican leaders allowed a small band of Tea Party fanatics to block budget talks for six months (GOP senators filibustered the creation of a budget conference committee 18 times) and refused to take yes for an answer. After all, the continuing resolution enacted by the Democratic majority in the Senate in September adopted the low spending level proposed by the House GOP, much to the dismay of those of us opposed to the misguided austerity called for by the 2011 sequestration at a time when the economy is so weak.

If that is not incompetence, then surely closing the government down first, and then demanding negotiations is. Imagine labor negotiations in which a union called a strike or a company imposed a lockout *before* sitting down to try to work out the issues.

Political scientists blame the polarization of American politics on the flood of money from corporations and plutocrats, the ability of the parties to gerrymander districts, the attack on organized labor, and our failings as citizens to vote.

But I wonder if the problem isn’t something more fundamental. It seems our politicians have forgotten what democracy is for: In a diverse society, we elect representatives to help reconcile competing interests in a peaceful and just way. That means accepting that we do not all share the same values and interests, and that the goal of politics is not to win and impose our will on others, but to find ways to compromise and accommodate each other. Of course, the system is imperfect. But it cannot work at all if parties and politicians represent only those citizens who agree with them—and refuse to compromise for the common good.

If I am at least partially right, the politicians could learn a lot from the thousands of unions and companies across America that employ collective bargaining. Every day, we must work in good faith at every level of the Postal Service to reconcile the wants and needs of letter carriers with the business and operational needs of management. It is not always pretty and we don’t always succeed, but we commit to a process that leads to resolutions.

Most NALC activists and many (but not all) postal managers know that compromise and respect for the other side’s legitimate rights is a must for success. This is just as true in legislative politics as it is in collective bargaining.

We clearly have a long way to go to return our democracy to health. NALC is committed to helping achieve this by working with both political parties, the Postal Service, the mailing industry and the other stakeholders on comprehensive postal reform. Perhaps we can teach the politicians a thing or two.