

‘Me first’—that’s not the NALC way!



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Remember those days when at international sporting events, Americans would burst into “USA! USA!” cheers?

The next time this happens, there’ll be something hollow about it for me, because far too many Americans spend their lives cheering *for* themselves—“Me! Me! Me!”

Or it seems so, because as far as I can tell, individualism in this country has run amok.

You want to be left alone? That’s fine with me—except when your “freedom” infringes on the rights of others, and attacks the very fabric of our communities.

Case in point: the rancher in Nevada who had grazed his cattle on public lands for years without paying a fee to the United States government. He didn’t want to pay for the privilege of using *our* land and *our* water, a privilege that fellow ranchers in Nevada and elsewhere in the West pay without objecting. So-called “libertarians” rallied about rancher Cliven Bundy, sometimes armed to the teeth, to protect his right not to pay the roughly \$1 million he owes the government for a 20-year period. Talk-show hosts, some politicians, and others supported his right to be a *free-loader*. And it was only after Bundy revealed himself to be a first-class bigot that these supporters of “me-first” ideology abandoned him.

But they haven’t abandoned the “me-first” ideology. Not by a long shot.

It’s not only that the “me-firsters” don’t like the federal government. Many of them don’t like *any* government—or any restrictions on their rights to do whatever they want to. The good officials of Keene, NH, apparently stepped way over the line by employing parking enforcement officers to patrol downtown parking spots. A group of self-styled “Robin Hooders” find this so offensive that they follow parking meter officials around, harassing them and making it all but impossible for them to do their jobs.

Their rationale? Paying for parking in a downtown commercial lot infringes on freedom, evidently because they believe anyone should be able to leave their cars for the entire day without having to pay for the privilege. But what about others who want to park? What about businesses who depend on a certain amount of parking turnover to induce customers to come downtown and shop? Not important to the Robin Hooders who want *their* freedom. Hey, you’re on your own.

On a personal note

I would like to inform the membership that I will not be running for re-election as an officer on the NALC Executive Council. My report in the *Officers’ Reports*, which will be given to each delegate attending the Biennial National Convention in Philadelphia, includes a section saying farewell and looking back at my 12 years as your secretary-treasurer, and 19 years on the Executive Council. As I say in my report, my reasons for retiring are largely personal. I want to express my appreciation to all of you for having allowed me to serve as your secretary-treasurer these past 12 years, and I look forward to serving you through the end of my term.

But me-firsters aren’t all ideological zealots. Many of them aren’t on a crusade—they just don’t care about anybody but themselves. I ride the Washington, DC, subway every day, and see well-dressed professionals coming into town from wealthy suburbs using the seat next to them for their briefcases while women in what appears to be the eighth month of pregnancy stand, wobbling with the shaking of the train and looking as if they might give birth before the next stop. Hey, you’re on your own.

NALC members often have to face these me-firsters on the workroom floor. I’m talking about non-union letter carriers who boast that there’s no reason to pay dues since they receive the same pay and benefits from our employer. Too bad we can’t say, “Hey, you’re on your own.”

But NALC members aren’t “me-first” people. We are committed to each other as union brothers and sisters. We are also committed to helping those less fortunate. That’s why we raise funds for MDA and collect food for the needy, and even why some of us have raced into a burning building or performed other heroic and live-saving acts.

It’s often noted that the decline of the American middle class has coincided with the decline of the American labor movement. But what also needs to be said is that a sense of collective responsibility to others—call it citizenship—has declined at the same time, and it’s not a coincidence.

What’s the answer? Stand shoulder to shoulder, link arms and push back against the ferocious individualism that threatens the very social fabric of this nation.

After all, we’re many—and as for them? Well, one here, and one there, just looking out for themselves—and not recognizing the value of serving others, the way union letter carriers do, both inside and outside the NALC.