

# Connecting the struggles of today to the victories of the past

**J**ohn Curtis knows that the phrase “labor history” can, unfortunately, cause people to tune out. He’s amassed a small library of information on the subject, but he wanted to get the information out of the library and into the hands of people who could use it.

“How do you make the core of that information available to more people who are likely to read it?” the retired member and editor of *The Maine Letter Carrier* for Central Maine Merged Branch 391 asked himself. The answer was the booklet *LOW WAGES and other HIGH CRIMES: Untold Stories of the 99%*, filled with short stories that show how workers have banded together and

overcome long odds to make the impossible possible.

“I wanted to give more people access to labor stories, not as a historical footnote, but as something that would help them see that there are ways to better your conditions at work now, because this is what people have done in the past,” he said.

He started writing the short 500-word stories more than a year ago as features for the branch newsletter, including one on the 1972 Farah Manufacturing strike that won First Place in the publication contest at the 2014 NALC Convention, but he realized he had enough topics to do a whole booklet. So he set a goal of doing about 25

and collecting them in a booklet. He worked on it for a year and published it late last year.

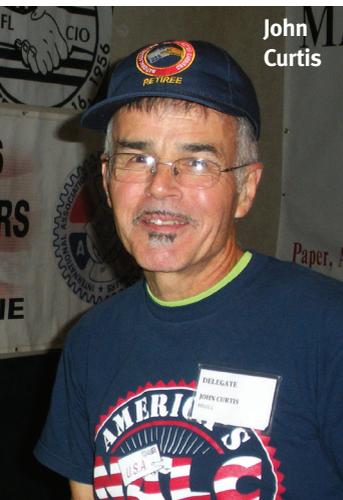
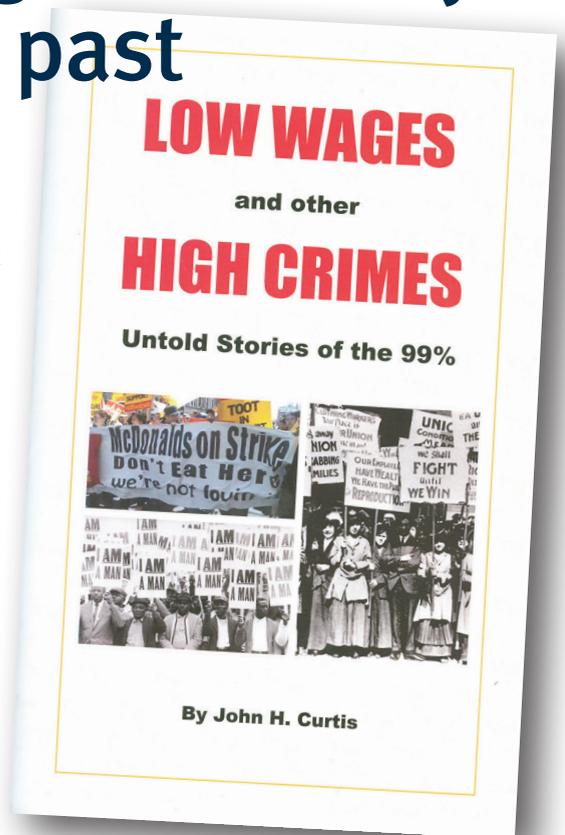
One of his main inspirations for the booklet is his work on the local level with a coalition advocating on behalf of low-wage fast food and retail workers.

“Part of the impetus for this was to get this book into their hands, to give them a little bit of historical perspective, so they know that it’s not impossible to take on McDonald’s,” he said. “If I wasn’t involved in that, I’m not sure I would have poured a year into doing a book like this. I want it to work for today.”

He hopes that the easy-to-read stories will encourage people to read more of them and to do their own research into the interesting history of the labor movement. Some of his favorite memories of working on the booklet came from doing that research.

“Even though it’s hard to find history on labor in general, it’s even harder to find labor history that deals with people of color,” he said. He made an effort to find stories about minorities, and the story about the 1964 Scripto strike that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. joined is one he’s especially fond of. “It teaches a lot about breaking down barriers.”

In a letter to Curtis, NALC President Fredric Rolando wrote: “This booklet serves a much-needed purpose in worker education for union members who have an interest in labor history but don’t know where to start. I am especially pleased that you made the effort to connect the great battles of labor history with similar battles faced by workers today.”



John Curtis

Curtis, originally from Maine, moved to New York City, where he became a computer programmer who handled data processing. Deciding to get out of the cubicle life in 1999, he moved back to Maine and became a letter carrier until 2011.

“After my first couple of winters in Maine, I wasn’t so sure that was a good idea,” he joked. He quickly joined NALC and took on the branch’s job of newsletter editor. He also is the state association’s director of education.

Curtis is still deciding how to distribute the book, but says he is printing a few hundred copies to distribute at the Maine State Association convention this month.

To get a copy of the book, please contact Curtis at [curtisNALC391@myfairpoint.net](mailto:curtisNALC391@myfairpoint.net). **PR**