

Remembering JAMES RADEMACHER

(1921-2015)

James H. Rademacher, national president of the NALC from 1968 to 1977, died on Dec. 15 of natural causes in Roanoke, VA. He was 94 years old.

“Jim spent his working life in the service of letter carriers, even through his retirement years,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said. “We will long remember his efforts and we offer our condolences to his family and friends.”

Rademacher, a member of Detroit

Branch 1, was president during the Great Postal Strike of 1970 and through the transformation of the cabinet-level Post Office Department into the modern United States Postal Service following the passage of the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970. He oversaw the first collective-bargaining agreement with USPS and the successful defeat in 1976 of the so-called “Kokomo Plan” of work and time standards that postal management had attempted to unilaterally impose.

A life of service

Rademacher was born into a letter carrier family on July 18, 1921—his father, James, was a member of the National Association of Letter Carriers in Detroit Branch 1; his brother, Bill, carried mail in Tucson, AZ; and his brother-in-law, James Rice, was a letter carrier in Roanoke, VA.

During high school, Rademacher proved to be an excellent student and a promising pitcher on the school’s baseball team. But in his household growing up, there was only one conceivable career—in the letter carrier service.

On Jan. 16, 1941, Rademacher took the oath as a temporary substitute carrier in the Detroit Post Office. Six months later, he became a career substitute.

In 1944, Rademacher entered the U.S. Navy and served for two years. Upon his honorable discharge in 1946, he returned to carry mail in Detroit and decided, at last, to attend his first branch meeting, bringing with him 15 new applications for NALC membership from his fellow Redford Station letter carriers. He soon was elected delegate to the Detroit and Wayne County Federation of Labor—the beginning of his rise through the NALC’s ranks.

Two years later, he was elected branch secretary as well as secretary of the Michigan State Association. And in 1950, the 29-year-old Rademacher was elected president of Branch 1. When then-NALC President William Doherty went to Detroit to install Branch 1’s officers, he announced during the ceremony that he was appointing Rademacher to the committee charged with establishing the NALC Health Benefit Plan.

Rademacher served as president of Branch 1 until 1960. It was a period of





Left: Rademacher (r) met with President Nixon on proposals to create a new “postal authority.”

Below: Rademacher signed the first collective-bargaining agreement with the Postal Service in July 1971.



enormous growth and progress for Detroit letter carriers. In 1941, the branch had 1,500 members; by the late 1960s, that number had more than doubled, and it had also grown in strength and in financial solvency.

Stir it up

Rademacher also had the capability of becoming the eye of a hurricane of controversy. In 1957, for example, when Congress refused to give the Post Office Department a badly needed supplemental appropriation, Postmaster General Arthur E. Summerfield retaliated by announcing that he was going to shut down post offices on Saturday.

As president of Detroit Branch 1, Rademacher decided to do something about it. He went to the branch’s attorney and had an injunction filed to prohibit the postmaster general from closing down the post offices. The federal judge in Detroit ultimately decided that the case was not in his jurisdiction since Summerfield was then living in Washington—but not before the case got major coverage from television, radio and print media.

Summerfield was not amused. Subsequently, a movement was begun in Washington to have Rademacher fired from his letter carrier job, although Detroit’s postmaster resisted the pressure and refused to do so.

Ever upward

While all this was going on, Rademacher was still moving up in the NALC. He was made a member of the National Sick Benefit Board in 1952, and in 1957 he joined what was then known as the NALC Executive Board—first as a regional field officer (akin to today’s national business agent)

for the Chicago Region, then for the Philadelphia Region.

In 1960, at the NALC’s biennial convention in Cincinnati, Rademacher became a resident national officer when he was elected the union’s assistant secretary-treasurer. At the same time, he continued to serve as a regional field officer, now for the Atlanta region.

Two years later, at the national convention in Denver, Jerome Keating was elected to replace the retiring William Doherty as president, and Rademacher was elected vice president. While serving as Keating’s “right-hand man” on legislative issues in Washington, Rademacher also worked as the hands-on editor of *The Postal Record*.

“I remember laying it out myself, on the conference table in my office on the eighth floor,” Rademacher recalled later.

As NALC’s vice president, he originated, planned and directed the union’s nationwide training program; he also held a position on the executive committee of the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

Into the ôre

In 1968, Rademacher was elected NALC president by acclamation at the union’s convention in Boston. Within a year, he would face one of his first major tests as president.

By the late 1960s, many letter carriers worked a second job just to make ends meet. NALC lobbied again and again for a pay increase that would finally raise the rank and file above the poverty level. Despite making promises to do just that, President Richard Nixon issued an executive order to boost postal pay by only 4.1 percent, effective July 1, 1969. With inflation running above 5 percent, this was far short of what postal employees were hoping for, and tempers began to flare.

Hoping to keep things calm, Rademacher sent a letter to every NALC member, urging them to stay cool and reassuring them that their union had put together a comprehensive legislative battle plan to win a better increase.

In late 1969, Nixon invited Rademacher to meet privately with him to forge a settlement on postal pay and postal reform. The two men met in the White House on Dec. 18 and managed to reach a compromise: Nixon would support a 5.4 percent pay increase effective Jan. 1, 1970, while Rademacher agreed to the idea of an independent “postal authority” to replace the Post Office Department. Under this new authority, a ban on strikes would be retained in exchange for allowing postal unions to bargain collectively with their employer over wages, hours and working conditions. Binding arbitration would be the last resort for issues the parties could not resolve.

While Rademacher and the NALC Executive Council worked with the Nixon administration to hammer out the details of this agreement, many members grew understandably angry when Nixon in early February 1970 deferred a wage increase that had been scheduled to take effect on July 1.

The Great Postal Strike

By March, rank-and-file frustration had reached greater levels, such that on the evening of March 17, letter carriers in New York City voted by a 3-to-2 margin to go out on strike. Soon,



Left: Rademacher was bandaged as part of a first aid demonstration in 1942.

Below: President John F. Kennedy was one of several dignitaries Rademacher met while in office.

other branches and employees from other crafts across the country would join in the walkout, and Rademacher was caught between his loyalty to his own members and his concern for the union's future.

He said he understood why letter carriers walked off their jobs, but feared that if he assumed leadership of this wildcat strike, making it official, the government would crush the union—bankrupt it with fines, padlock its offices, strip away its jurisdiction, jail its officers and fire its members. Later, Rademacher acknowledged that there simply are times when workers have no choice but to strike.

After receiving assurances from the Nixon administration that negotiations with postal employees would begin once the strike ended, Rademacher called an emergency meeting of the presidents of NALC's 300 largest branches on March 20 in Washington.

Meanwhile, on March 23 in a nationally televised address, Nixon declared a national emergency, ordering 25,000 soldiers into New York City to break the strike and move the mail. Unsurprisingly, the troops were ineffective since none had the skills that postal workers possessed.

Eight days after the strike began—after receiving word from NALC leaders that some type of an agreement had

been reached with the Nixon administration—most letter carriers returned to their routes. Rademacher and other postal union leaders, assisted by the AFL-CIO, quickly began round-the-clock negotiations with the Post Office Department. By April 2, the parties had reached an agreement they believed would satisfy the demands of the carriers and clerks.

The "Memorandum of Agreement" expressed the postal unions' and the department's accord in four basic areas: pay increases totaling 14 percent—6 percent retroactive to Dec. 27, 1969, and an additional 8 percent effective whenever a postal reform bill was enacted; support for the establishment of an independent postal authority; collective bargaining over wages, hours and working conditions with unresolved issues to be settled through final and binding arbitration; and "compression" of the time required for postal workers to reach the top step of their grade level from 21 years to eight.



Congress quickly approved the 6 percent retroactive pay increase, and this became law on April 15. Obtaining congressional approval of the remaining elements of the memorandum proved more difficult, and it was not until Aug. 12, 1970, that the Postal Reorganization Act became law.

Letter carriers and other postal workers had, at long last, achieved full collective bargaining with their employer. And Rademacher would be partly vindicated as the decades ahead progressed, as the postal reform legislation he had supported brought collective bargaining to postal employees, freeing them from "collective begging"—the total dependence on the good wishes and wisdom of their elected representatives. Carriers now worked for a new employer. The old Post Office Department had been put to rest, replaced by the U.S. Postal Service.

Political action

By the mid-1970s, NALC's leaders began to realize that legislative issues still were of vital importance to the union, and that lobbying Congress still was a viable means of improving letter carriers' wages and working conditions—collective bargaining was not the only path toward those goals. Union leaders also understood that the collective-bargaining rights enjoyed by postal employees were themselves a product of congressional action—and what Congress could give, Congress could certainly take away.

So in March 1975, Rademacher launched a Legislative Liaison Network designed to build an extensive network of members who would write their congressional representatives. The NALC Executive Council took an additional step on July 21, 1975, when it formally christened the small political action fund the union had established the previous year as the Committee on Letter Carrier Political Education—COLCPE—with the aim of "determining and implementing programs to collect voluntary funds" and the responsibility of dispersing these "contributions to, or expenditures on behalf of, candidates for federal elective office." (In 2015,



NALC Heroes of the Year

In 1974, President Rademacher established the annual Hero of the Year awards to recognize letter carriers who perform courageous acts in their communities, often risking their lives to save others. Over the years, the awards have been expanded to include those carriers who personally work to improve their communities and to branches for their collective

and/or ongoing community service work. While the awards have evolved to reflect the growing list of contributions made by NALC members and their local branches, the purpose of the recognition remains unchanged: to pay tribute to those who go well beyond their normal duties on the job and recognize the positive impact letter carriers have on the public we serve.

COLCPE was renamed the Letter Carrier Political Fund.)

Contracts and Kokomo

In early 1971, NALC and the other postal unions were entering into the unions' first national contract negotiations with USPS. Letter carriers hoped their newly won collective-bargaining rights would lead to substantial improvements in wages and working conditions.

The collective-bargaining agreement that the NALC signed with the Postal Service on July 20, 1971, fell short of the expectations of many letter carriers. Nevertheless, it was in many respects a major accomplishment, because not only did the contract provide for wage increases and a cost-of-living adjustment—the first ever for postal employees—it also contained a “no layoff” clause.

Almost from the beginning of the new Postal Service, postal management had been determined to raise productivity. Congress expected the new USPS to be “business-like”—to take whatever steps might be necessary to break even. For carriers, this meant speed-ups, harassment, over-supervision and, most important, a renewed dependence on the union to combat management's more aggressive style. Managers put carriers under extreme pressure to deliver their routes at break-neck speed. Unresolved grievances piled up in response.

In April 1974, postal management announced that it would begin a pilot work-measurement system called the Letter Carrier Route Evaluation System (LCRES), to be tested first at South Kokomo station in Kokomo, IN. If judged a success by management, the “Kokomo Plan” (as LCRES soon came to be known) would then be introduced into every postal station in the country.

The Kokomo Plan involved establish-

ing work and time standards for each letter carrier function. These would be put into a computer that then would determine an eight-hour route for each individual carrier.

Delegates to the 1974 NALC convention in Seattle, well aware that a postal strike would be illegal, nevertheless voted to authorize Rademacher to call a nationwide strike if the Postal Service implemented LCRES and “if it is not to the liking of the letter carriers.”

NALC entered into arbitration with USPS over LCRES in September 1975, with Rademacher charging that USPS had violated the National Agreement by unilaterally increasing the workload of letter carriers. The president also reasoned that, if the arbitrator did rule against the union, then the NALC still could call a strike to prevent the Postal Service from implementing the system.

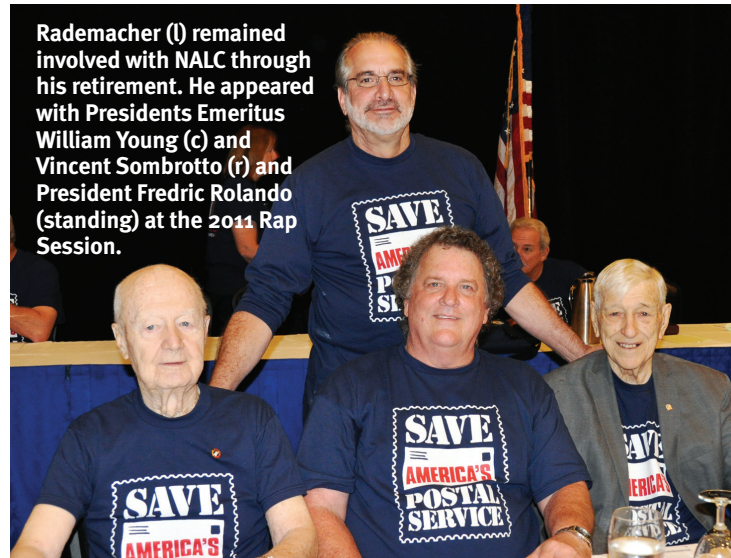
The arbitrator issued an interim decision on July 8, 1976, prohibiting management from forcing carriers to work overtime at another LCRES test site—the Rose City Park Station in Portland, OR. One month later, on the eve of the NALC's national convention in Houston, the full award was announced: LCRES was in violation of the National Agreement. The NALC position was upheld, and convention delegates roared their approval as Rademacher announced, “Kokomo is dead.”

At that same convention, the president announced his retirement. Rademacher

lived his later years near Roanoke, VA, where he remained active with Branch 524 as well as the national union.

Rademacher is survived by his wife, Ellen; his daughter, Linda; his son, Charles; and three grandchildren, five great-grandchildren and two great-great-grandchildren. (His first wife of 64 years, Martha, died in 2005.)

A private funeral service was held shortly after Rademacher's death. Those who wish to honor Rademacher may contribute in his memory to their choice of charity or charities. **PR**



Rademacher (l) remained involved with NALC through his retirement. He appeared with Presidents Emeritus William Young (c) and Vincent Sombrotto (r) and President Fredric Rolando (standing) at the 2011 Rap Session.

This article was adapted from an article in the January 1969 Postal Record as well as from portions of Carriers in a Common Cause, the NALC's official story about the struggles of letter carriers from the birth of the Postal Service in 1775 to today. Carriers in a Common Cause is available through NALC's Supply Department and also through download from nalc.org. Also found on the website is the video, “Seven Decades of Activism: A Conversation with NALC President Emeritus James H. Rademacher.”