

Remembering the day the mail stopped

At 12:01 a.m. on March 18, 1970, a courageous band of letter carriers in New York City launched what is now called the Great Postal Strike. On its 46th anniversary, NALC remembers their action and the legacy it left.

It's important to put the strike in its context. Postal workers had suffered a 50-year losing streak beginning with World War I. Pay scales were frozen, then cut back, and even the "happy days" of the 1950s passed them by as President Eisenhower vetoed four postal salary bills.

By 1967, things were so bad that post office job turnover was around 25 percent a year. Under the gun from their bosses, local managers became increasingly authoritarian and letter carriers became increasingly exasperated—tired of being bullied and denied a living wage.

The National Association of Letter Carriers was caught between a political rock and a legal hard place—a political establishment unwilling to deliver good wages and a decent workplace, and the legal ban on strikes by government employees.

Complicating matters, in May 1969, President Nixon proposed replacing the Cabinet-level Post Office with a self-supporting postal corporation. The NALC and other postal unions objected because the plan would have kept the ban on strikes while stripping away civil service benefits and job protections.

That June, NALC President James Rademacher—in a calculated bit of political grandstanding—announced a court challenge to the federal "no-strike" oath. A week later, he testified before Congress, and the next day, one newspaper proclaimed, "Hill Warned of Strike Over Postal Pay."

Within New York Branch 36, a militant "rank-and-file movement" had coalesced around 23-year carrier Vince Sombrotto, a battling Irish-Italian who later became NALC national president, to press the union for meaningful action. So it happened that on March 12, 1970, Branch 36 President Gustave Johnson was interrupted at a branch meeting as he described a compromise reform bill, worked out secretly between Presidents Nixon and Rademacher. Shouts broke out: "No, no! Not enough! Strike! Enough talk! Strike!"

A tumultuous debate ended with agreement to hold a strike vote the next Tuesday, March 17—St. Patrick's Day. When the tally was announced at 11 p.m., the NALC's largest branch had voted 1,555 yes, 1,055 no—a 3-to-2 margin in favor of a strike.

At the stroke of midnight, members of Branch 36 began throwing up picket lines around post offices throughout Manhattan and the Bronx. Within hours, other branches joined in and the wild-cat strike spread across the land.

There is much more to this story, told in the NALC history, *Carriers in a Common Cause*, but the key result was the adoption of the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970, which created the U.S. Postal Service. The act gave postal unions the power to bargain for wages and benefits, and the ability to arbitrate contract disputes and enforce members' rights.



As bargaining begins on a new national agreement, we take a moment to say thanks to the men and women who put their jobs on the line to protect themselves and the carriers who followed in their footsteps. **PR**

Carriers in a Common Cause is available for purchase from the NALC store by calling 202-393-4695. It can also be viewed online at nalc.org under About NALC and Our History. A video commemorating the strike can also be viewed online at nalc.org/strikeat40.

