

Heroes and the labor beat



**Philip
Dine**

For more than a quarter-century, I covered the best beat in journalism: labor.

The best beat, for several reasons. The labor beat is unlimited in its breadth, encompassing public policy and kitchen-table economics, charismatic personalities and spirited philosophical debates. It's an intensely human beat, full of real people trying to improve the lives of other real people, free of the rehearsed affectations of the political world. It's a fascinating beat, replete with colorful union leaders and dramatic job actions.

And because so few reporters cover the labor beat, on any given story you have the field essentially to your-

self. The "pack" journalism so widespread on other beats is non-existent here. Labor reporters can pretty much decide for themselves what to write about and how to approach it, all the more so because editors these days are increasingly clueless about blue-collar folks and their unions.

So I had the privilege of covering one compelling labor story after another: The shock waves sent through labor by Ronald Reagan's high-stakes breaking of the air-traffic controllers strike. The under-the-radar role of legendary teachers union leader Al Shanker in the revolutions that overthrew communism in Eastern Europe. The largest strike by black workers in the history of Mississippi, with 1,100 impoverished female catfish workers prevailing against all odds. The democratization of the mob-influenced Teamsters union, followed by epic election battles between Ron Carey and Jim Hoffa. The firefighters' efforts in the Iowa caucus that triumphed over the rest of the labor movement to help Sen. John Kerry secure the Democratic presidential nomination. House Democratic Leader Richard Gephardt's creative maneuvers that brought to a rapid conclusion a showdown between the Machinists and McDonnell Douglas—then the nation's largest defense contractor—that threatened national security (gather both sides in his Capitol Hill office, provide the negotiators with lots of pizza and soda, and hide the bathroom key). The behind-the-scenes work by Rich Trumka, Hoffa and AFSCME's Gerry McEntee with white working-class voters in Pennsylvania that helped propel Barack Obama to the White House.

Fascinating stories all, but none is more compelling than the NALC's annual Heroes of the Year event in Washington, DC.

And the 2016 Heroes of the Year awards ceremony, held in mid-September, was particularly inspiring. As the letter carriers

spoke, there was not a rustle or a whisper in the room—only rapt attention from a visibly moved audience.

That stemmed from the bravery and the compassion that were on display in the stories of what each Hero had done.

Patrick Byrne of Lynn, MA, has helped untold families break through the challenge of substance abuse after losing his own son. Syracuse, NY letter carriers delighted a seriously ill child by organizing a parade of postal trucks to welcome him home after months in the hospital. Evangeline Johnson, of Southfield, MI, helped a woman and her daughter escape from a house engulfed in flames. Lars Edleblute of York, PA, rescued a young boy who had jumped a fence onto a busy highway. St. Louis' Michael Murphy tackled a cinderblock-wielding man attacking three women in two cars. David Crestik of El Cajon, CA, carried an injured woman out of her burning home. Bradley Gentz of Osage, IA, transformed a wheelchair-bound boy's life by participating with him in marathons around the country. Mark Pizzo of Snellville, GA, saved a girl by fighting with a pit bull that had her head in its jaws and was dragging her away.

What set this year's event apart was that beyond mentioning—humbly, of course—their own actions, each Hero spoke of being far more inspired by what the others had done.

These are not just interesting stories, these are stories of profound humanity and heroism.

And that was reflected in the media coverage these letter carriers earned, from metropolitan newspapers such as the *Des Moines Register*, *San Diego Union-Tribune*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *Syracuse Post-Standard* and *Gwinnett Daily Post* and other publications to ABC, NBC and Fox TV affiliates in Philadelphia, St. Louis, San Diego, Iowa, Minnesota and elsewhere.

As you deliver the mail, you take actions like these simply because it's how you regard your job and your role in the community. But by raising even higher the public's respect and admiration for letter carriers, you make it easier to get our message out and to tell people the truth about the Postal Service and letter carriers.

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The Postal Record (ISSN 0032-5376) is published monthly by the National Association of Letter Carriers. Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Membership Department, NALC, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144.

Subscription included in membership dues. First-class subscription available for \$20 per year (contact Membership Department).

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Circulation: 287,000. Union-printed using soy-based inks.

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