

A new contract and a fresh appreciation for collective bargaining



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This month we're focused on the very heart of NALC's organizational purpose: the recent conclusion of a tentative national labor contract through free and fair collective bargaining. The proposed deal outlined in the pages of this issue of *The Postal Record* is the result of 15 months of sustained effort by the union's officers and staff. I have already thanked them all for their efforts, but the real thanks must be extended to the members of our great union.

Thanks to the patience, solidarity and unity of America's letter carriers, the leaders of this union were able to negotiate as equals with the U.S. Postal Ser-

vice. This is the magic of collective bargaining—as individuals, we are powerless to negotiate with a \$70 billion-per-year enterprise. But together, the NALC, backed with the power of a 93 percent membership rate, had a real say in the setting of our wages. We played a significant role in determining the terms and conditions of our employment.

We said we would remain at the bargaining table as long as progress was possible and a path to success remained—and that is exactly what we did. In an age of universal and instantaneous communications, negotiations are not easy. Negotiators are forced to keep a lot of details close to their vests, particularly when there are so many moving parts to the negotiations. If bargaining in the traditional media is unwise and difficult, then bargaining in the social media is pretty much impossible. So I very much appreciate the patience, trust and support of our members over the past year or so.

For the eighth time in 14 rounds of collective bargaining since 1970, active letter carrier members of NALC will soon have the chance to vote for or against the terms of a new contract. That means you have the power to determine your own destiny. Although I am proud to join my colleagues on the Executive Council in recommending ratification of this tentative agreement, I want you to fully appreciate the value and importance of our right to bargain collectively, no matter how you vote on this 40-month contract. This right should not be taken for granted.

One of the best ways for you to show your appreciation for your union rights is to exercise your democratic right to vote on this contract. Please urge carriers in your workplace to do the

same.

After more than a year of painstaking negotiations, I am freshly reminded how special collective bargaining can be. It levels the playing field for workers in a setting that would otherwise give managers and owners all the power and advantages. At the same time, collective bargaining, at its best, is the art of problem-solving that benefits all parties. When it works, it reconciles competing interests in a just and sensible fashion. It makes equality and fairness in the workplace possible. And it makes possible a decent standard of living for all the workers in a company, not just the folks in the executive suites.

We should all feel grateful for the hundreds of thousands of letter carriers who came before us to build the NALC—and especially for those who battled to win collective-bargaining rights for us. At the next branch meetings when the tentative contract is being discussed, I hope every branch leader takes the time to give a shout-out to the retired members in attendance. Their solidarity made this contract possible. I also hope every branch will renew its commitment to defend these rights and to pass them on to the brothers and sisters who follow us.

Thinking more broadly, it is a shame that so few Americans benefit from union rights these days. The importance to freedom of unions and collective bargaining was once a common belief among Americans of all political stripes. President John F. Kennedy perhaps said it best: "Free collective bargaining is good for the entire nation. In my view, it is the only alternative to state regulation of wages and prices." That is a message that even pro-business conservatives used to embrace. In fact, long before he destroyed the air traffic controllers union PATCO in 1981, President Ronald Reagan, himself a former union president, noted that "where free unions and collective bargaining are forbidden, freedom is lost." While unions and bargaining are not prohibited in America, our laws and our corporate-dominated politics in recent years have severely discouraged them. And the resulting loss of economic freedom and justice for American workers has been enormous.

So as we consider ratification of a new national agreement, let's not just be thankful. Let us recognize that those of us who benefit from collective bargaining have an obligation to help our friends and families win the rights to organize and bargain collectively as well. I can't think of a better way to strengthen our country and our democracy than by strengthening our labor movement in the years to come. Solidarity truly is forever.