

# Is the strike making a comeback?



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**T**his month we celebrate, as we have for 49 years, the Great Postal Strike of 1970. We do that because the standard of living we have and the workplace rights we enjoy today were won by the brave strikers of 1970—first in New York City and then across the United States. That strike won collective-bargaining rights for nearly 700,000 U.S. postal employees.

I believe it was one of the most consequential strikes in American history, alongside the Pullman Strike and the great Flint Sit-Down Strike. It supercharged the federal labor movement and helped cement a growing recognition that public employees deserve the same rights as private-sector workers. And it trans-

formed the lives of hundreds of thousands of families—moving them from near-poverty to a solid perch in the middle class by replacing collective begging with collective bargaining.

In 1970, there were more than 1,000 strikes in the United States involving large employers—though ours was by far the biggest. More than 25 percent of workers belonged to unions then. As a result of collective bargaining, the benefits of economic growth were widely shared—as the economy grew and productivity increased, wages increased, too. That’s because when a critical mass of workers are organized, unions have the power to set wage standards in major industries and companies, a power that benefits union and non-union workers alike.

Between 1945 and 1979, pay increases for the lowest-paid workers increased as much as they did for middle-class workers—and roughly the same as those for the highest-paid workers. Unfortunately, the 1970s proved to be the high-water mark for American workers. Since 1979, wages and living standards have stagnated and income and wealth inequality has soared. The reason for this is a very complicated story, but the decline of unions and the evisceration of the right to strike by federal courts and by the country’s political leadership are front and center in that story. In 2017, there were only seven major strikes in the United States.

**But that may be changing. The strike may be making a comeback—against all odds.** Last year, teachers in the unlikeliest places decided to say “enough is enough.” After decades of declining pay and worsening conditions—for themselves and their students—teachers all over the country rebelled. In West Virginia, Kentucky and Arizona, teachers went on strike. Their heroic walk-outs remind me in some ways of the Great

Postal Strike of 1970. Like our strike, the teacher strikes in the South and the West were illegal in most states—the teachers did not have the right to strike under the law. But they did it anyway. Like the letter carriers of 1970, they decided to fight for their rights and for what was right. Thanks to the support of the broader labor movement—most importantly from unionized teachers represented by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), the strikes in West Virginia, Kentucky and other states were a huge success. The public in these states supported the teachers and the politicians were forced to respond to the demands for decent pay and benefits—and for improved schools for the country’s children.

In January 2019, the AFT staged another successful strike in Los Angeles, where teachers showed once again that strikes can serve both the public’s interests and the interests of union members. They secured better pay, but they also improved staffing and struck a blow against the creeping privatization of public education in the United States. Their success is an inspiration that offers hope to workers everywhere.

As we did in 1970, the teachers fought for themselves and for their families, but also for the public they serve. Our strike led to the Postal Reorganization Act. The PRA not only won collective-bargaining rights for postal employees, but also modernized the Postal Service. It ended political interference in postal operations, provided for new investment in our networks and dramatically improved services while preserving the most affordable universal mail service in the world.

Although our brothers and sisters in other federal unions did not resort to a strike during the recent outrageous 35-day partial shutdown of the federal government, they did extraordinary work to mobilize their members to protest and to garner public support for their cause. NALC was proud to stand in solidarity with these fellow federal trade unionists (see story on page 8).

The popularity of unions is the highest in years—according to Gallup, 61 percent of Americans had a favorable view of unions in 2018 and only 30 percent had an unfavorable view. The Pew Research Center found in 2018 that young people are especially pro-union. This is incredibly encouraging news. At a time of declining trust and confidence in many of our country’s major institutions—the White House, Congress, the media and Big Business—the growing support for strikes and for the labor movement offers hope for a better future for American workers and for the country as a whole.

**As we celebrate the anniversary of the Great Postal Strike of 1970,** I urge every member to take the time to learn about NALC history. But just as importantly, please find a way to honor the heroes of 1970 by supporting the struggles of other American workers who are organizing and striking today.