

The strength of a union



**Philip
Dine**

We've spoken often in this space about the strengths of NALC, and have attributed them to the leadership at all levels combined with the dedication and skills of rank-and-file letter carriers.

I can't say that this strength and those attributes have never been more fully on display than over this year—this union, after all, has a long history, and folks say that something momentous occurred a half-century ago—but I've witnessed nothing like it in the decade I've been privileged to work here.

Consider the challenges letter carriers and their union have recently faced.

Starting some nine months ago, though it seems much longer, the once-in-a-century pandemic has added

uncertainty and risk to your work; it's also added millions of packages and a heavy responsibility, with people depending on you to bring them household supplies they once procured for themselves, as well as those much-needed government checks and medications, and much more. All of that, combined with the impact of the coronavirus on the postal workforce, has meant long and arduous days for America's letter carriers.

Then the looming election ratcheted up both the work and the scrutiny, with politicians and the media pushing their narratives—some looking for signs of postal incompetence or fraud, others for hints that political attacks or operational changes were making it impossible for USPS to carry out the election duties. Hype and speculation were everywhere, even over routine events, as you dealt with an historic level of mail ballots amidst a pandemic and a political maelstrom.

Adding to the mix has been uncertainty over the Postal Service's future, given the pandemic-induced economic shutdown and the political wrangling in Washington, as incomprehensible decisions were made about which economic sectors should get stimulus relief.

If all of this weren't enough, the small matter of your contract and the related uncertainties also weighed on you.

So, how have letter carriers fared?

As a result of your hard work and bravery, you have won widespread recognition as a key component of the nation's essential workforce, supplying families with necessary items but also with the sense of normalcy and optimism you always manage to deliver in troubled times. The workforce shortages and long hours, the intense workload and some odd directives from above did not deter you from your mission-focused approach.

Despite the fretting among the pols and the press about whether you could cope with a mail-centric election, you carried out those duties so seamlessly that an attentive nation

stood in a figurative standing ovation to the new guardians of democracy.

Helping the public shelter safely and vote safely—no small feat.

The financial future of our employer? TBD for now, but there are hopeful signs.

And the negotiations? You now have a tentative contract to consider.

How did all of this get accomplished over just three-quarters of a year? Short answer: a symbiotic and productive relationship between no-nonsense and determined leadership, from Headquarters to the smallest branches, and a membership armed with a can-do attitude, a firm grasp of what is at stake and an appreciation for the craft.

These aren't platitudinal words; I've observed firsthand how NALC's leaders confront issues aggressively yet calmly, aiming not to make waves but to find solutions. This has manifested itself in the daily efforts to improve letter carrier safety during the pandemic by bringing problems of supplies or processes to management's attention, and in the task force developed with NALC participation to resolve election-related issues at the highest level. Equally impressive has been the role played nationwide by letter carriers, new or experienced or retired, in getting the word out to the public about the role of letter carriers and USPS in the pandemic and in the election.

I've covered some impressive union battles over the decades, including the against-all-odds victory, in a small Delta town forgotten by time, of the United Food and Commercial Workers in the biggest strike by Black workers in the history of Mississippi; the transition of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters from a mobbed-up union to one featuring a boisterous democratic process; or the quiet role of the AFL-CIO in aiding the fledgling independent labor unions in Eastern Europe that helped bring down Communist rule in the region.

I don't know, however, that I've ever seen a workforce and its union jointly deal with such a multitude of complex and difficult issues, and emerge victorious and all the stronger for it—while helping an entire country do so as well.

This has been labor—in the dual senses of the work being done and the power of a union—at its finest.

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