



News from Washington

Congress passes fifth COVID-19 relief package

It's been a busy month in Congress, with a hearing on postal reform, the nomination of new members of the Postal Service's Board of Governors and the reintroduction of the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act. Media coverage largely focused on the passage of the latest round of COVID-19 relief, which had been at the top of the Democrats' agenda when they won control of Congress and the White House.

Both the House of Representatives and the Senate passed the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act and sent the legislation to President Biden, who signed it on March 11. The legislation provides a fifth round of COVID-19 relief to the American people.

Of critical importance to letter carriers are two key provisions that NALC successfully lobbied for:

- Establishment of an Emergency Federal Employee Leave Fund for federal and postal employees. Most letter carriers are familiar with the COVID-19-related leave provisions from the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) that were in effect in 2020 but expired on Dec. 31. This bill provides up to 600 hours of paid leave for each full-time employee, or a proportional equivalent for part-time employees at a capped rate of \$35 per hour and no more than \$1,400 per week. The bill also carries forward the same COVID-19-related reasons for using the leave that was included in the FFCRA but adds new reasons, such as getting vaccinated. While the FFCRA required that leave be paid at only a two-thirds rate for certain reasons, this bill contains no such



President Biden signs the American Rescue Plan Act into law.

reduction in the rate at which the leave is paid. A \$570 million fund is included to pay for the leave.

- Workers' compensation language that presumes a positive COVID-19 diagnosis for postal (and federal) employees as work-related. The presumption would authorize benefits such as medical, disability and survivor benefits for workers who contracted COVID-19 in the three-year period beginning Jan. 27, 2020, and ending Jan. 27, 2023.

The bill also:

- Provides \$1,400 in direct payments to individuals with an adjusted gross income of \$75,000 or less, with a phase out at \$80,000; and \$2,800 for joint filers with an adjusted gross income of \$150,000 or less with a phase out at \$160,000; with an extra \$1,400 for each child or adult dependent.
- Expands child tax credits for children under age 17 up to \$2,000, and

provides \$3,000 dependent care tax credits for kids between the ages of 6 and 16, and \$3,600 for children under age 6.

- To supplement any state unemployment benefits, provides an additional \$300 in weekly federal unemployment benefits through Sept. 6, 2021—a reduction from the House-passed weekly \$400 federal supplemental benefits through Aug. 29.
- Provides 100 percent COBRA subsidy for Americans who lose health insurance coverage after losing their jobs—up from 85 percent passed by the House.
- Provides funding to stabilize multi-employer pension plans through 2050 and to protect earned retirement benefits for a million workers whose pensions have been on the brink of collapse due to shortfalls in the federal pension insurance system.

- Provides \$200 million for Department of Labor workplace safety protections.
- Provides funding for state and local governments for vaccines, testing, schools, transit/rail/aviation, restaurants, small businesses, food and nutrition benefits, housing and expanded Medicare programs.

The bill originally included language to raise the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour, but the Senate parliamentarian ruled that its inclusion would violate the Senate rules of reconciliation.

The legislation passed in the Senate along party lines 50-49, with all Democrats voting for the bill. In the House as well, every Republican opposed the final legislation, as did Maine Rep. Jared Golden, the lone Democrat to oppose the measure.

NALC expects the Department of Labor to issue guidance on the leave and workers' compensation provisions in the near future. NALC will work with the Postal Service on implementation of the leave provisions and will provide updates as more information becomes available.

Postal reform hearing held in House

On Feb. 24, the House Committee on Oversight and Reform (COR) held a hearing to discuss postal reform efforts in the 117th Congress. The hearing was also an opportunity for members of Congress to question witnesses on a variety of topics, including recent service disruptions, the pandemic and its impact on the workforce, concerns regarding the quality of Postal Service leadership, and USPS's yet-to-be-announced 10-year business plan, which

has been under development for months.

Witnesses testifying at the hearing were USPS Board of Governors (BOG) Chairman Ron Bloom, USPS Postmaster General Louis DeJoy, USPS Inspector General Tammy Whitcomb, American Postal Workers Union (APWU) President Mark Dimondstein, Quad Graphics President/CEO Joel Quadracci and American Enterprise Institute Resident Scholar Kevin Kosar.

On the issue of postal reform, a "discussion draft" of a bill was made public just before the hearing. It includes adoption of the USPS Fairness Act (H.R. 695), which would repeal the mandate to pre-fund retiree health benefits, and a proposal to reform postal employee health insurance coverage under the Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) Program to integrate it on a prospective basis with the Medicare program, thereby slashing health care premiums for the Postal Service, its employees and its annuitants, and reducing the burden on the postal Retiree Health Fund. In addition, to address ongoing service quality issues, the draft would impose new transparency requirements to improve reporting on service performance and to require progress reports to Congress on efforts to improve service.

The hearing was tense at times, with pointed questions and comments directed at both DeJoy and Bloom regarding operational changes and service disruptions that have continued since last summer. However, committee members also focused on the need to finally repeal the mandate to pre-fund retiree health benefits as part of a



Ron Stroman



Amber McReynolds



Anton Hajjaar

broader reform measure. The inclusion of this repeal would be a major victory for NALC. As letter carriers recall, the USPS Fairness Act passed the House with a strong bipartisan majority last year, paving the way for its inclusion in this year's postal reform efforts.

Over the course of the hearing, the discussion over the basic elements of a reform bill were largely positive and bipartisan, with COR Ranking Member James Comer (R-KY) committing to support the underlying elements of the bill while citing the need for additional structural and cost-cutting reforms. In addition, each witness expressed general support of the core provisions of the discussion draft.

The discussion draft is expected to be fine-tuned in the coming weeks prior to introduction, and NALC is working directly with the committee to ensure that our feedback is incorporated prior to its formal introduction.

White House announces postal Board of Governors nominations

On Feb. 24, the White House issued a press release announcing its plans to nominate Amber McReynolds, Ron Stroman and Anton Hajjaar to the postal Board of Governors (BOG). Currently, there are three vacancies on the board with terms that expire in 2021, 2023 and 2026. Once the White House officially sends the nominations to the Senate, we will know which terms each nominee will fill.

Stroman served as the deputy postmaster general and chief government relations officer for the United States

President Biden comes out strong for union rights

In a video released Feb. 28, President Joe Biden reiterated his strong support for labor unions holding organizing drives free of interference or intimidation.

“I have long said: America wasn’t built by Wall Street. It was built by the middle class, and unions built the middle class,” President Biden said. “Unions put power in the hands of workers. They level the playing field.

They give you a stronger voice: for your health, your safety, higher wages, protections from racial discrimination and sexual harassment.

“The choice to join a union is up to the workers. Full stop. Full stop,” Biden said. “This is vitally important, a vitally important choice as America grapples with the deadly pandemic, the economic crisis, and the reckoning on race, what it reveals—the deep disparities

that still exist in our country, and there should be no intimidation, no coercion, no threats, no anti-union propaganda.

“Unions lift up workers, both union and non-union, and especially Black and brown workers,” Biden said. “I’ve made it clear—made it clear when I was running—that my administration’s policy would be to support unions organizing and the right to collectively bargain. I’m keeping that promise.” **PR**

Postal Service, before retiring in 2020. Prior to joining USPS, Stroman worked on Capitol Hill, serving as a staff member on the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, and on the House Judiciary Committee. In addition, Stroman also served in the Department of Transportation and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. He received his bachelor’s degree from Manhattan College and his law degree from Rutgers University. Stroman also recently served as the head of the Postal Service Agency Review Team, with NALC Chief of Staff Jim Sauber.

McReynolds is one of the country’s leading experts on election administration and policy and co-author of the book *When Women Vote*. She is the CEO of the National Vote at Home Institute and Coalition, and is the former director of elections for Denver, CO, where she developed the nation’s most sophisticated vote-by-mail system. She has proven that designing pro-voter policies and voter-centric processes, as well as implementing technical innovations, improve representation for all voters. She received her bachelor’s degree from the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana and her master’s degree from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Hajjar is the former general counsel of the American Postal Workers Union (APWU). Hajjar’s experience includes pro bono employment discrimination, including for Arab and Muslim Americans after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. He continues to advise the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. He currently serves on the American Law Institute’s governing board. He received his bachelor’s

degree from Fordham University and his law degree from Tulane University Law School.

“NALC appreciates the White House prioritizing these vacancies and looks forward to working with the Senate to move their nominations as soon as possible,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said. “NALC urges the White House and Senate to also re-nominate Ron Bloom, who recently was named BOG chairman and whose term expired in December.” Bloom continues to serve during a one-year holdover year permitted under the law.

House passes PRO Act

On March 9, the House of Representatives passed the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act (H.R. 842), which seeks to restore protections that bolster the rights of workers to organize and bargain for better wages, benefits and working conditions.

H.R. 842 passed by a vote of 225-206 with five Republicans—Reps. Brian Fitzpatrick (PA-1), Don Young (AK-at large), John Katko (NY-24), Chris Smith (NJ-4) and Jeff Van Drew (NJ-2)—joining a majority of Democrats. Rep. Henry Cuellar (TX-28) was the only Democrat who voted against the measure. H.R. 842 was introduced by Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA) and 195 original co-sponsors in the House, and by Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) and 44 original co-sponsors in the Senate.

The PRO Act supports workers’ right to strike for basic workplace improvements, including higher wages and better working conditions; create a mediation and arbitration process to ensure that corporations and newly formed unions reach a first contract; authorize

unions and employers to negotiate agreements that allow unions to collect fair-share fees that cover the costs of representation; and protect the integrity of union elections against coercive “captive audience” meetings. The PRO Act would streamline the National Labor Relations Board’s (NLRB) procedures to secure worker freedoms and effectively prevent violations by establishing penalties on corporations that violate workers’ rights, and by combatting misclassification of workers as supervisors or independent contractors.

“NALC appreciates the 225 bipartisan members of Congress who demonstrated their support for basic worker protections,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said. In addition to lobbying for passage of the legislation, NALC sent a letter to the House in support of this important legislation.

“While NALC is an open shop with more than 93 percent voluntary membership, we do not take our success in organizing for granted,” Rolando said in the letter. “To protect our rights, we know that all workers must enjoy a real right to organize, not just a theoretical right to do so. We stand in solidarity with the millions of workers and their families whom this legislation will benefit.”

The legislation now must be considered by the Senate, where 60 votes will be needed to pass the bill and get it to President Biden’s desk. The president issued a strong statement of administrative policy in support of the PRO Act.

NALC will continue to lobby for enactment of this important legislation and any future positive legislation, such as the Public Sector Freedom to Negotiate Act, to ensure that all workers have the right to organize. **PR**