

## One year later



**Fredric V. Rolando**

**A**s I write this message in mid-March, it is hard to believe that it's been one year since we began to shut down our country to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been a long year filled with anxiety, loss and grief. Fortunately, as we look ahead and anticipate a distribution plan that will make vaccines readily available to all Americans, we can think about life returning to some semblance of normal.

Additionally, we have begun to witness the beginnings of very positive change on several fronts: Last week (March 8), the NALC Ballot Committee announced that the active membership had ratified the 2019-2023 National Agreement by an

overwhelming margin. (See story on page 4.) The next day, the House of Representatives passed the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act, the most sweeping and positive effort to reform our nation's labor laws since the 1930s. Finally, on March 10, the House adopted the Senate's version of a massive COVID-19 relief and recovery bill, the American Rescue Plan, which President Biden signed into law on March 11—the one-year anniversary of the declaration of the pandemic.

Each one of these major developments is a great victory and, taken together, they represent unadulterated good news for letter carriers and America's working people.

**The new contract increases wages over its 44-month term** and provides a shorter, more predictable pathway to a career appointment for city carrier assistants (CCAs). We have already begun to use the contract's various joint task forces and memorandums of understanding to engage management on a full range of issues important to letter carriers, including efforts to address toxic workplace cultures, safety issues, contract compliance failures, work method changes, staffing concerns, route evaluations, innovation and CCA attrition. I want to thank all of the members who voted in the ratification election—and all of the members of the Ballot Committee, who did such a superb job under the most challenging of circumstances.

Every new contract reminds us of the value of our precious right to collective bargaining—a right NALC won this very month 51 years ago, thanks to the 1970 postal strike. Even though more than half of all American workers say they would join a union if they could, the rights to organize and bargain collectively have been badly damaged over the past several decades. Bad court decisions that have tilted the balance of

power in favor of employers and permitted companies to intimidate and coerce workers during organizing drives, as well as state laws that undermine unions financially, have dramatically weakened the U.S. labor movement.

**How fitting that the PRO Act should advance to the Senate** during the very week we ratified our contract. (See story on 5.) If it becomes law, it will repeal these unfair policies and help unions to grow and to rebuild our nation's middle class. With your help and the solidarity of the AFL-CIO, NALC will do all we can to fight for enactment of this vital legislation, even as we continue to work with members of Congress to pass legislation addressing our postal-related priorities.

Finally, the enactment of President Biden's \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan promises to help our country crush the virus and provide desperately needed economic relief for our families, our schools, our small businesses and millions of front-line workers like us. In addition to another round of economic support payments that will bolster the economic recovery from the pandemic, the legislation also provides concrete support for city letter carriers, which NALC tirelessly and successfully lobbied Congress to achieve.

It appropriates \$570 million to an Emergency Federal Employee Leave Fund for federal and postal employees to pay for COVID-19-related leave provisions like those from the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) of 2020, which expired on Dec. 31. Between March 12 and Sept. 30, 2021, the act provides for 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, but no more than \$1,400 per week. The bill also carries forward the same COVID-related reasons for using the leave that were included in the FFCRA, but adds new reasons as well, such as vaccination-related absences. Additionally, while some types of FFCRA leave from last year were paid at only two-thirds of hourly wages, this bill contains no such reduction in the leave pay rate.

The Rescue Plan also requires the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP) to presume a positive COVID-19 diagnosis for postal (and federal) employees to be work-related. The presumption would automatically authorize Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA) benefits, including medical, disability and survivor benefits for workers who contract COVID-19 in the three-year period beginning Jan. 27, 2020, and ending Jan. 27, 2023.

**Hopefully, the availability of vaccines, combined with our** continued adherence to protocols regarding face masks, social distancing and sanitization, will keep this pandemic in check and allow us to move forward. Stay safe, sisters and brothers.