

'A Union of Essential Workers' meets in Chicago



Fredric V. Rolando

As I said in my opening address to more than 5,000 delegates and guests to the 72nd Biennial Convention:

All NALC conventions are, by definition, special occasions. There is pure magic in the idea of men and women of all ages, races, religions, ethnicities and family backgrounds coming together from every corner of a gigantic country for a common cause. Our cause is a fierce solidarity that has blossomed and endured over 133 years. That we do so in the great city of Chicago—after some of the most challenging years in our country's history—makes it even more special.

And, for me, it was special for a variety of reasons. First, it was special because after four long years, during which we endured a deadly pandemic and gained the recognition of the American public as the country's most essential workers, we were finally able to gather in person. The joy of this simple fact was palpable and could not be hidden by the face masks we wore to minimize the threat of COVID-19 infections.

Over five days, we celebrated how our union and its members rose to the occasion during the pandemic. Letter carriers helped tens of millions of Americans work from home, shelter in place, and stay safe by delivering prescription drugs, household necessities and billions of e-commerce packages. We distributed relief checks from the Treasury and health bulletins from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. We made it possible for nearly half the country's 160 million voters to safely cast their ballots by mail in 2020 in the highest-turnout election in our lifetimes. And we have delivered—and continue to deliver every day—do-it-yourself COVID-19 test kits that have helped tens of millions of Americans monitor their health status and limit the further spread of the virus. All this work has been broadly recognized by the American public, as demonstrated in a poll that named the Postal Service America's most essential enterprise in 2020.

Inspired by this overwhelming public support, and in celebration of our contributions to American life during the once-in-a-century pandemic, we chose the theme of the Chicago convention—**A Union of Essential Workers**.

That theme also embraced the essential work delegates do for the union every day: such as the shop stewards who enforce our contract, the branch officers who give life and energy to our

branches; the health benefit and Mutual Benefit Association representatives who make those services real for our members; the food drive and Muscular Dystrophy Association coordinators who power our community service activities; the political and legislative activists who drive our legislative agenda; the Letter Carrier Political Fund contributors who amplify our advocacy; and the retired members whose experience, knowledge and commitment animate the NALC's essential spirit of solidarity.

Second, the convention showed that a new generation of letter carriers is ready and able to take up the mantle of union leadership and activism. On the first day, I asked for a show of hands from all the first-time delegates. A large number of delegates raised their hands. Over the rest of the week, they showed up to work alongside more experienced delegates every day, from the early morning to the late afternoon, to focus on ways to improve the lives of our members. Over five general sessions, they debated dozens of National Agreement and general resolutions to advance that goal, and they discussed a variety of amendments to the *NALC Constitution* to make our union stronger. They also attended and vigorously participated in more than 30 workshops to arm themselves with the knowledge and skills to better serve our members.

Third, it was special because we finally got to properly celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Great Postal Strike of 1970, with a viewing of a new documentary called "The Revolt of the Good Guys" (now posted at youtube.com/ThePostalRecord) and a special exhibit called "The Week the Mail Stopped." That celebration was delayed by two years because of the pandemic, but it filled the convention hall with an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the strikers of 1970 and—I hope and trust—inspired the current generation of NALC activists to dedicate itself to improving the jobs of letter carriers who come behind us.

Finally, the Chicago convention was special to me because it was my last convention as NALC's president. I will not be a candidate for reelection as president this fall. I look forward to handing off the reins of leadership. You will decide who leads this great union next. I have no doubt that you will choose wisely—and I will be there for the next president to help in any way that I can. I will bid my farewells at the end of my term. In the meantime, we will continue over the next four months to represent letter carriers to the best of our ability and to make the coming leadership transition as smooth as possible.

For now, let me say what I said to the delegates at the end of the Chicago convention:

It's been an honor to serve as your president for 13 and a half years and to chair these last six conventions. Stay well. I love you.