

# Great Postal Strike remembered with informative videos



Dearborn, MI, letter carriers went out on strike in 1970.

**T**hough it happened 53 years ago, the Great Postal Strike of 1970 still resonates with letter carriers, especially when they listen to the story as told by the members who lived it. NALC has posted a pair of videos about the strike on YouTube for letter carriers and the broader public to watch.

The strike marked a new era in NALC's history that ushered in dramatic change for the union, its sister unions and the Post Office, and that formed the basis of letter carriers' rights to this day. The strike began at the local level with a few thousand letter carriers walking off the job, but the conditions that led letter carriers in New York Branch

36 to strike had been simmering for decades across the country. Letter carrier morale was low as Congress repeatedly failed to raise letter carrier pay to adequate levels, and sometimes actually reduced it, even in the face of runaway inflation. Letter carriers and other postal workers had no collective-bargaining rights—they could only ask Congress for better wages and benefits, lacking the right to negotiate for those basic items—hence the informal term “collective begging.”

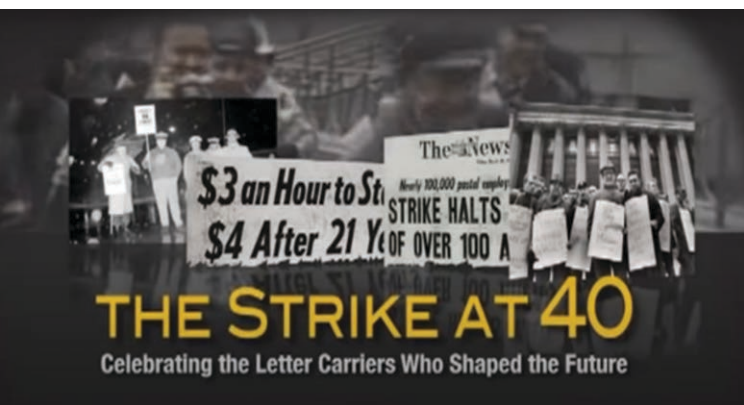
As a result, an average of 1 in 4 letter carriers left their jobs each year, and some who stayed were impover-

ished enough to qualify for welfare benefits.

The frustration peaked on March 17, 1970, a week after a congressional committee voted for a small pay raise for letter carriers that the strikers viewed as insufficient. Led by rank-and-file letter carrier Vince Sombrotto, Branch 36 members voted 1,555 to 1,055 to strike, taking that step even though they lacked the legal right to strike and therefore risked being arrested. Just after midnight on March 18, picket lines went up at post offices throughout Manhattan and the Bronx.

Undelivered mail, including millions of paychecks, pension checks, bank transfers and other vital items, quickly piled up. NALC branches throughout the country voted to walk off the job and sister postal unions agreed to honor the strike. A week into the strike, President Richard Nixon ordered a group of active duty, reserve and National Guard troops to New York City to get out the mail. Hundreds of sailors, airmen and soldiers arrived at the post office on Eighth Avenue and 33rd Street on March 24 and quickly learned how difficult sorting and delivering mail really was. With no training or experience as letter carriers, and a week of backed-up mail sitting in piles, their mission soon floundered.

As a result, the Nixon administration gave in to most of the strikers' demands, and letter carriers returned to work. A few months later, Congress adopted a major reform of the Post Office, making it the independent, self-funding agency it is today and granting collective-bargaining rights to its workers. From that day forward, NALC would represent letter carriers at the bargaining table.



Over the years, NALC staff and independent scholars have gathered material and information about the strike, including interviews with its leaders and participants, and made them available on the union's YouTube channel: [youtube.com/@ThePostalRecord](https://youtube.com/@ThePostalRecord). Here are some details about the videos:

### 'The Strike at 40'

The 32-minute video, produced in 2010, used archival news footage and new interviews from strike participants to tell the ground-level story of the strike. Those participants, including Sombrotto, who after the strike would become president of Branch 36 and later of the national union, explain the frustrating conditions that led them to risk their jobs and even risk arrest by going out on strike.

The video leads viewers through the historic strike vote at the Manhattan Center and its aftermath. It shows the immediate reaction of the public and the media to the strike, and how supportive the public was as the strike spread to other cities.

Historical footage of National Guard and other military personnel trying to fill in for letter carriers demonstrated the measures President Nixon was taking in an effort to end the postal disruption. After the letter carriers declared victory, they returned to work. The participants concluded the video by reflecting on the legacy of what they had accomplished.

### 'The Revolt of the Good Guys'

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the strike, NALC produced a nearly one-and-a-half hour documentary to add a broader perspective. The 2020 film looks at the strike from the point

of view of then-NALC President James Rademacher.

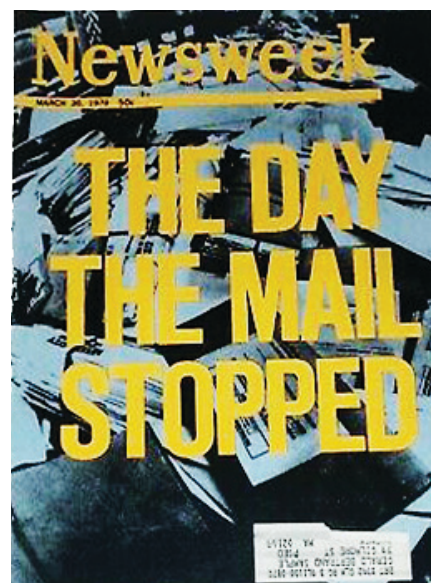
The film features interviews, archival footage, long-forgotten records, and even part of a fictional series based on the strike—the Amazon Prime show “Good Girls Revolt” featured a character based on Sombrotto. That fictional account bookends the all-too-real story of letter carriers risking it all.

The film starts well before 1970, showing how the Post Office Department was on a “race toward catastrophe” that ultimately led to the strike. As the conflict stretches on, letter carriers’ impatience led to the strike vote of March 17, 1970.

The film details the actions of the strike with interviews and footage that showed the difficult position Rademacher was in, as leader of NALC during a wildcat strike. It meticulously shows how the White House and NALC Headquarters resolved the conflict after the strike ended by negotiating the establishment of a postal corporation along with a pay raise and collective-bargaining rights for postal employees.

Finally, the video explains the importance of the strike for letter carriers in the 1970s through today and beyond.

“Remembering our history, especially this watershed moment, is important for every letter carrier, from the new ones still learning the job to retirees who experienced the job before the strike changed everything,” NALC President Brian L. Renfroe said. “As we mark the 53rd anniversary of the strike that had such a dramatic impact for our union, our members, and the Postal Service, I invite carriers to check out these videos to see up close what happened and to hear it from those who lived it.” **PR**



Publications such as *Newsweek* covered the strike as it was going on.