

Collective bargaining— past, present and future



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On April 12, 2018, President Trump signed an executive order that created a task force to study and make recommendations on the finances of the Postal Service. The task force included several department and federal agency heads—members of the administration. The report was originally due on Aug. 10 but was pushed back until after the midterm elections.

As you have likely read, the task force issued its report, titled “United States Postal Service: A Sustainable Path Forward,” on Dec. 4. The report includes 25 recommendations in all, some of which appear to be positive and some that would, if enacted, be harmful to the Postal

Service and letter carriers.

In this article, I will focus on one task force recommendation that is a direct attack on postal employees, including letter carriers. The task force recommends eliminating collective bargaining over compensation for postal employees. To fully understand and appreciate what such a drastic action would mean for letter carriers, we must understand our union’s history of fighting for, achieving and maintaining this important right.

1970, the turning point

Prior to 1970, NALC fought hard to become the exclusive bargaining representative for letter carriers. That right was gained in 1962 after a vote among postal employees following an executive order from President John F. Kennedy. While letter carriers had some collective-bargaining rights after 1962, these rights did not include the ability to negotiate over compensation. Pay raises could be authorized only by Congress for employees of the Post Office Department, as the branch of government was called at the time. Despite repeated lobbying efforts, wages for letter carriers were not livable.

In 1970, letter carriers in some parts of the country were eligible for welfare, even after receiving pay for 40-hour workweeks. Some even received more in welfare benefits than in pay from the Post Office Department. Pay was that low. By 1970, letter carriers had had enough.

On March 18, 1970, letter carriers in New York City went on strike and set up picket lines outside New York post offices. The illegal strike was led by a rank-and-file letter carrier from Branch 36 named Vincent R. Sombrotto, who later would serve as president of Branch 36 and as NALC

president from 1979 to 2002. He is undisputedly the most important figure in our union’s long and storied history.

The strike quickly spread around the country. After eight long days, the letter carriers returned to work. Their actions led to the passage of the Postal Reorganization Act. The Act became law on Aug. 12, 1970. This landmark legislation changed much of the relationship between the Post Office and the government, but most importantly for letter carriers, it provided us with full collective-bargaining rights. NALC now had the legal authority to negotiate wages, hours and working conditions for letter carriers.

An unmatched record of success

Since gaining full collective-bargaining rights in 1970, NALC has negotiated or achieved through interest arbitration 14 collective-bargaining agreements for letter carriers. Thanks to the hard work of the men and women of our past and present, no other union can match our record of success in collective bargaining. Each contract has provided frequent wage increases, including both negotiated general wage increases and cost-of-living adjustments. In June 2019, we will formally begin negotiating our 15th collective-bargaining agreement.

Our ability to collectively bargain was a result of the hard work and sacrifice of the men and women of our union over a long period of time. Since 1970, our union has fought off numerous attempts to take this important right away from us. The recommendation of the task force related to collective bargaining can simply be explained as an effort to take us back nearly 50 years to a time when letter carriers did not have the ability to bargain over compensation.

The hard work NALC members do for our country every day makes us deserving of the right to bargain collectively for a fair, living wage. We will work with our supporters in both parties in Congress to fight any attack on this important right. The strength of our union is in our large, diverse and active membership. NALC members will fight back as we always do.

A note of thanks

I want to thank the membership for electing me to serve as executive vice president. As the son of a letter carrier, I am privileged to have the opportunity to continue to serve our members. I approach the office with understanding, appreciation and respect for our union’s past, confidence in the present and excitement and optimism for our future. Our membership becomes stronger and more diverse every day. You, the members of NALC, will continue to make our union strong as you always have.