

# ACTIVIST

NALC

A NEWSLETTER FOR BRANCH LEADERS OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF LETTER CARRIERS  
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## Branch leader roundup: Organizing

**N**ALC branch leaders and stewards know that every day is full of challenges and demands. Handling grievances, talking to members, coordinating a wide variety of union activities—plus dealing with normal work and family concerns—leaves little time for anything “extra.” However, the need to organize new hires and longterm non-members cannot be viewed as an extra. Effective organizing is essential to the NALC’s continued survival and strength.

In the past year, the Postal Service has hired more than 30,000 new carri-

ers—more than double the number hired in the previous year. Each of these new hires belongs in the NALC—adding to the power and unity of hundreds of thousands of union members. Branch leaders cannot assume that these new hires will automatically join the union. Rather, each branch needs to focus its efforts to ensure that new letter carriers realize the importance of the NALC from their first day on the job.

In this article, branch leaders with an excellent track record in organizing new hires answer questions about how to sign up NALC members. As

their comments indicate, organizing the unorganized must remain a top priority for NALC local leaders and stewards across the country.

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A steward’s lot can be a happy one, as Northern Virginia Branch 3520 stewards discover as they share stories from the workroom floor with branch president Bob McCeney (right).

## Journal notes: Steward at work

**O**ver the years, numerous *NALC Activist* articles have offered in-depth views of aspects of the steward’s job. These stories explain the grievance process, ways to organize and “unionize” NALC members, how to get members involved in political and community activities, and on and on.

But how do stewards, in real life, manage to blend all these duties and continue to carry mail full time? To provide a sense of how NALC stew-

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## Journal notes

*continued from page 1*

ards not only function, but perform effectively, day after day, four stewards in Northern Virginia Branch 3520 offered to keep daily diaries for several weeks and to share those diaries with *Activist* readers. To maintain confidentiality for these stewards and the carriers they represent, their separate diaries have been blended into one summary of several weeks in the life of a "typical" steward. All identifying details have been omitted or changed.



**Deborah Quinn**

What remains, however, is a portrait of a very busy person who nonetheless retains a keen sense of justice and concern for carriers. As the daily record shows, stewards wear many hats—counselor, advocate, social director, source of practical information as well as inspiration and support. Stewards are truly the glue that holds the union together, as this composite diary suggests.

Many thanks to Branch 3520 stewards Tom Cleer, Curtis Glasper, Deborah Quinn and James Timmons for sharing their time and thoughts.

\* \* \* \*

MONDAY: While crossing parking lot to station, was stopped by Carrier C\_\_\_, who wanted to know about annual leave policy during December. Explained that no one can be guaranteed AL in December. Carrier C\_\_\_ unhappy, said she was to be part of family wedding out of the country the week after Christmas. Told her I'd see what I could do.

Clocked in; noticed that supervisors were counting mail on some

routes, no reason given. Noted route numbers in case something comes up later. Rest of day passed without incidents.

TUESDAY 9:00: Stand-up. Station manager announced permanent schedule change. I asked questions about the change to clarify what's happening for all carriers. At end of discussion, I took a few minutes to announce plans for Christmas party, also passed hat for carrier who's just had a baby.

9:10 a.m.: Called into pre-disciplinary interview (PDI) with carrier charged with delaying mail, management said carrier came back early from route leaving mail.

4:48: Back in office after carrying route. Happened to note another carrier who left early for route, got back early and also left mail. Noted these circumstances to use possibly later if this morning's PDI goes further—could be evidence of disparate treatment.

Asked for meeting with station manager to discuss Carrier C\_\_\_—needing annual leave after Christmas. Manager said, "No can do," had already refused requests for leave from senior carriers. I suggested that carrier request emergency annual leave; manager agreed to grant this request.

WEDNESDAY. Quiet day except for message, right before clocking out, from branch president that a carrier had called him complaining about me as steward, that I didn't process his grievances. Carrier is on light duty, always seems to have gripes that are not grievances. I called branch when I got home; president said not to worry, recognized carrier as chronic complainer, president supports me.

SATURDAY. Clocked in; had discussion with Carrier J\_\_\_ who lost his driver's license, is being transferred out of station. He said he

wants to stay in station, perform non-driving duties. I agreed to talk to postmaster on his behalf, see what can be done.

MONDAY. 8:45 a.m., postmaster visited our office. He obviously didn't



**Curtis Glasper**

want to talk to me, I managed to get his ear, asked about Carrier J\_\_\_'s problem, PM tried to brush it off but I persisted till he heard me out. I then pointed out to PM one route with over 30 feet of cut mail. Asked PM for his definition of "delayed mail." PM cut me off, but I feel I made important point.

TUESDAY. 9:00 a.m., called into discussion with supervisor and carrier who refused to go out on street today after delivering for 9½ hours yesterday. Carrier said she had blisters all over feet, supervisor accused her of "poor attitude." Carrier took medical leave to visit doctor.

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Many questions from carriers while casing mail about progress in negotiations, I told them I would check with branch president for more info.

Otherwise uneventful day.

WEDNESDAY: Clocked in, posted several newspaper articles about negotiations that supplement info in *NALC Bulletin*. Fielded more questions while casing. Carrier P\_\_\_ wanted to talk to me in private about EAP, what I know about it. I tell her what I know, which isn't much, and also promised to get back to her with advice from branch office.

THURSDAY: Big deal this a.m. was altercation between Carriers E\_\_\_ and O\_\_\_. These two people have never liked each other; casing side by side, E\_\_\_ said something to O\_\_\_, no one really knew what. E\_\_\_ went into swing room, O\_\_\_ followed and made threats (again, nobody knows what was said). Back on floor, carriers argue, yell at each other. I came over, got supervisor, asked supervisor to order them back to work. They complied. I went out on route.

When I came back in p.m., I discovered that carriers started yelling at each other again, floor supervisor and station manager took each one into office to talk to, then sent both home "pending an investigation."

Stopped by Best Western on way home to confirm reservation for branch Christmas party.

FRIDAY: First thing after clocking in, checked with supervisor about what was happening with the two carriers sent home yesterday. Investigation was this a.m. I asked for time to talk to carriers alone, both admitted losing tempers but said it was no big deal.

During investigatory interview, station manager asked me to put what I saw in writing. I refused, verbal testimony should be enough. I explained that a supervisor saw and heard exactly what I did; told station manager to get that supervisor's testimony in writing. Manager told us all to leave, go back to work, manager will issue decision at some later time. (*Note, no decision on matter even weeks later. This happens frequently; will participate in many PDIs that never lead to discipline. Hopefully my arguments in PDI lead supervisors to reconsider discipline decision.*)

Notice that Carrier J\_\_\_ who lost license was working today. Supervisor had him casing mail; later I learned that J\_\_\_ also delivered mail with someone else driving. Made note of all this, is evidence that work exists in station that J\_\_\_ could perform.

MONDAY: 8:45 a.m. Noticed that postal inspectors were in office and found some delayed mail. I made note of circumstances in case something comes of this.

# USPS

## BY THE NUMBERS

<u>USPS Operations—AP12 1998</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Chg from SPLY*</u>
Total mail volume year-to-date (YTD) (billions of pieces)	181.4	3.4%
<b>Mail volume by class (YTD in billions)</b>		
<i>First-class</i>	93.2	1.0%
<i>Priority Mail</i>	1.1	11.4%
<i>Express Mail</i>	0.1	6.2%
<i>Periodicals</i>	9.5	-0.8%
<i>Standard A (bulk)</i>	75.5	7.2%
<i>Standard B (parcels)</i>	0.9	-0.8%
<i>International</i>	0.9	-5.1%
Daily DPS letter mail volume (pieces)	127 million	53.4%
<i>Percent of total letter mail</i>	29%	—
City routes with DPS mail	144,000	22.0%
<i>Percent of total</i>	86.2%	—
Daily delivery points (millions)	129.7	1.4%
<i>Percent city</i>	75.5%	—
<i>Percent rural</i>	24.5%	—
City carrier routes	167,311	-0.8%
Rural carrier routes	62,138	4.5%
Net Income (\$millions, YTD)	\$ 865	-38.1%
<i>Total Revenue</i>	\$55,308	3.3
<i>Total Expense</i>	\$54,442	4.4
<b><u>Employment/Wages—AP12/PFY 1998</u></b>		
City Carrier employment	241,303	1.3%
<i>Percent union members</i>	91.6%	—
<i>Percent career employees</i>	98.9%	—
City carrier casual/TE employment		
Casuals	6,943	-7.1%
<i>Percent of bargaining unit</i>	2.9%	—
Transitionals	2,602	-39.2%
<i>Percent bargaining unit</i>	1.1%	—
City carriers per delivery supervisor	19.6	-1.0%
Career USPS employment	785,479	2.9%
City carrier avg. straight-time wage	\$17.28/hr.	2.4%
City carrier overtime ratio (overtime/total work hours)	12.3%	—
<i>Ratio SPLY</i>	12.3%	—

\*SPLY = Same Period Last Year

This information compiled by the NALC Research Department from USPS Reports.

TUESDAY: 2:10 p.m. Supervisor got me off route for interview with Carrier H\_\_\_\_. Earlier in the day, H\_\_\_\_ apparently mentioned to



**Tom Cleer**

another carrier that he had a gun in his car. H\_\_\_\_ was back at work after day AWOL.

Last month H\_\_\_\_ also had day AWOL. When he came back, he said he was being followed by mysterious people who threatened his life. No mention of gun last month.

Today supervisors searched his car, did not find gun. Interview was official discussion about threats of violence. Carrier H\_\_\_\_ warned not to make such remarks.

WEDNESDAY: 4:45 p.m. Back in office after delivering route. Supervisor started the "Hit Parade," having brief discussions with numbers of carriers who returned early. Today it was six people; I was there for each discussion which consisted of, "Don't do it again." Unusual for Hit Parade to be in p.m., usually a feature of morning routine for carriers who clock in early.

THURSDAY: Stand-up today. I asked for contributions to Combined Federal Campaign, annual charity fund drive. Also took up collection for carrier with cancer. Explained finalized Christmas party arrangements.

Question from Carrier K\_\_\_\_ while casing about leave for dependent care, can he use this kind of leave when he has to pick up child from day-care

center? I told K\_\_\_\_ dependent leave is for caring for sick kids or other relatives, doubt that it can be used as he described, but promised to check into it and get back to him.



**James McKinnon**

FRIDAY: 9:20 a.m. Called into official discussion

with carrier charged with taking unauthorized breaks for smoking, warned not to do it again.

Otherwise uneventful day. Stopped by branch office on way home, talked about complaint made earlier by carrier on light duty. At home, tried to catch up on notes of incidents to follow up. And more to come next week! ■

## Organizing

*continued from page 1*

Almost every new carrier hired by the Postal Service goes through orientation and training. This is the prime time to inform new hires about the NALC and get them signed into the union. However, some branch leaders may encounter roadblocks in the process. Here is how effective organizers deal with some of the challenges that can occur during new-hire orientation.

**The Postal Service wants to cut back on the time we have to talk to new hires during orientation. What should we do?**

"From time to time management will try to cut back on the NALC's time to speak with carriers during orientation," says South Florida Branch 1071 treasurer Santos Luyanda. "It may not happen everywhere or be something that comes up all the time, but whatever amount of time you

have with new hires, you need to stand firm and keep that time."

## Contract guarantee

Luyanda and other branch leaders note that the NALC's presence during new-hire orientation is guaranteed by the *National Agreement*. Article 17, Section 6 states, "During the course of any employment orientation program for new employees, a representative of the Union shall be provided ample opportunity to address such new employees." Peter Cherkes, vice president of Portland, Oregon Branch 82, notes that this same section of the contract also states that the Postal Service cannot present any health benefit information or forms to new carriers until after the NALC representative has had a chance to talk to the new hires.

For that reason, he observes, the opportunity to talk to new hires usually comes on their very first day.

And this creates a golden opportunity to present the union's case. Cherkes adds that he used to feel a little guilty about making a presentation on that confusing first day—"waving yet another piece of paper under their noses," he laughs. "But I got over that. In fact, we're really doing them a favor by signing them into the union, so we need to be strong and effective from Day One."

**No one from our branch can be at new-hire orientation—it's too far away. People from other branches or the NBA's office talk to carriers who will be coming to our branch. How can I find out if all of these carriers have joined NALC at orientation?**

Very often, leaders of small or medium-sized branches are not directly involved in new-hire orientation sessions. For example, new carriers coming to Schnectady, New York Branch 358 receive their training in Albany. "One of the biggest challenges for me is finding out who



slipped through the NALC net, so to speak, during orientation,” says Schenectady’s John Foley, who is branch secretary and chair of the membership committee. “I need to coordinate information both from the Postal Service and the NALC local leaders who do the organizing, then track the people who haven’t joined to their stations.”

Foley makes a point of visiting each new nonmember and talking one-on-one about the advantages of joining NALC. “I’m really upfront with each of them,” he says. “I tell them I’m really enthusiastic about the union and I want them to join.” If carriers resist Foley’s initial approach, he alerts stewards to be sure to follow up with each carrier on a regular basis.

**Are there any shortcuts to getting new hires signed up? Any magic words to say?**

There’s no single right way to sign up new members, as any effective NALC organizer can tell you. “Each group—each carrier, really—is a little bit different,” says Bob Herdlein, executive vice president of Buffalo, New York Branch 3. “I like to take a little time to talk informally, open things up to questions—just try to be honest.”

Most branch organizers begin with a brief history of the NALC, underscoring the major benefits that the

union has achieved for letter carriers. The organizer gives each new hire a packet containing relevant information, including a copy of the branch newsletter as well as brochures about NALC’s health benefit plan, the Mutual Benefit Association (life insurance) and the NALC MasterCard program.

Although there’s no magic formula, many organizers have discovered one simple trick that can significantly speed up the organizing process. “If you can, have an 1187 *already filled out* for each new carrier,” suggests Larry Ramsey, president of Toledo, Ohio Branch 100. “When you start talking, make sure the form and all the other information they need is right in front of them. Then all they have to do is sign the form.”

**Do people join more readily if you scare them a little—that is, tell them that management is out to get them and the union will protect them?**

Most effective organizers have found that a confrontational attitude—talking about “us versus them” with regard to management—actually turns off new hires. “People don’t want to hear that they’re going to experience conflict all the time,” says Portland’s Peter Cherkes. “I use an approach that stresses the positive aspects of the job—how important

the Postal Service is to all Americans, how valued the letter carrier is. But I’m honest about the downsides, too—we’re out there delivering in rotten weather, on days when normal people stay inside.”

Brooklyn, New York Branch 41 president Angelo Mangano agrees. “It’s a much easier sell to talk about all the positive benefits of joining the NALC,” he says. “It’s good to remind people that the union will protect them, but right at the beginning, you don’t want to get people scared.”

**What can you say to new hires who don’t want to join until after their 90-day probation is up?**

“I hear that a lot,” says Toledo’s Larry Ramsey. “People will say that management told them not to join until after the 90 days, because they aren’t covered by the grievance-arbitration procedure during their probation.” Although Ramsey confirms that the NALC cannot grieve an employee’s dismissal during the probationary period, he adds that there may be other action that the union can take on the carrier’s behalf. “Many times we can work informally to relieve problems for new hires,” he says.

Dan Rapp, president of Cleveland, Ohio Branch 40, agrees. “Depending on the situation, there may be quite a bit we can do for people during their 90 days,” he says. In any case, he

notes that often the people who have stated that they want to wait will sign up anyway during the orientation session. "Most people will change their minds during the presentation," he says. "They realize there's no real reason not to join."

**What about people who say they don't want to pay dues? They know the union will represent them anyway.**

"The bottom line with most people who don't want to join is the money," says Portland's Peter Cherkes. "They may say it's something else, but it almost always comes down to that one thing."

There are several ways to approach these people, he notes. "The basic argument is how much money the union has made for them," he says. "Their dues is really a very small amount compared to the money that the NALC has added to their paychecks.

"Then I point out all the benefits they will be losing—the branch functions, representation for Workers Compensation or EEO. And although they'll be represented by the union, they won't have a voice in how the union operates."

**What about people who say they want to check with a spouse or take more time to think about joining?**

"Sometimes there are one or two people in an orientation session who tell me they don't want to decide right then," says South Florida's Santos Luyanda. "I can respect that, but I make sure I have their names and the stations where they will be working." The branch office sends out personal letters to each of these people, he says, and alerts stewards in the stations. "Usually the first day these people report to work at the station, the NALC steward comes by with another 1187 for them. But many times those people have already mailed in the 1187—they were con-

vinced, but just wanted to check with someone at home."

The key is to keep coming back, notes Jimmy Maynor, vice president of Durham, North Carolina Branch 382. "Whatever they say about why they don't want to join, you have to keep talking to them," he says. "When they're in the station, we visit them. We ask the steward to check in with them, too. You just never give up."

Maynor and other branch leaders can cite many instances when firmly resistant new hires—and longterm nonmembers as well—have changed their minds completely about joining the NALC. "You never can tell what gets to them," Maynard says. "Sometimes it's pressure from other carriers in the station, sometimes they'll have a need for the union, or feel grateful for something the branch has done for them."

There's no denying that organizing is a time-consuming, challenging

job—whether you are making presentations to new hires or being persistent with those carriers who don't sign right away. But every branch leader knows that the work that goes into signing new members always pays off. "You've got to remember that these people need the union, and the union needs them," says Portland's Peter Cherkes. "It's really true—the union is its members, and every new member means that the NALC will be able to do that much more for all the letter carriers we represent."

*Branch leaders who may have questions concerning any aspect of signing new hires should contact their National Business Agent's office. The NBA can help resolve difficulties raised by Postal Service management, provide information about who is responsible for NALC orientation sessions for branches and offer additional information and advice about organizing nonmembers.* ■

## Organizing longterm members

Think of it as a challenge, an opportunity, even a test of your reasoning skills. That's how many NALC stewards view a longterm nonmember's resistance to joining the NALC.

In most cases, longterm nonmembers have had years to polish their reasons for not joining the union. The key to winning these hearts and minds is not to be critical or threatening, but rather to be open, ready to listen and above all, be patient.

NALC's booklet, *How to Get Yes for an Answer*, emphasizes this approach. As the booklet states, "Remember: It's a free country. Everyone has a right to his own ideas. If you pressure people or otherwise make them feel angry at the way you are asking them to do something, they

will turn you off."

The booklet also suggests ways to track efforts to sign these nonmembers. One approach is for each steward to keep a record on each nonmember, including the times you talked to him or her and the arguments they raised.

Finally, the booklet offers ideas for making sure the door stays open for a return visit. "If you are rejected the first time you visit a nonmember—and you very well might be—keep things on a friendly level. Thank the nonmember for his or her time. Tell them you'll be back again to talk. Leave materials with them.

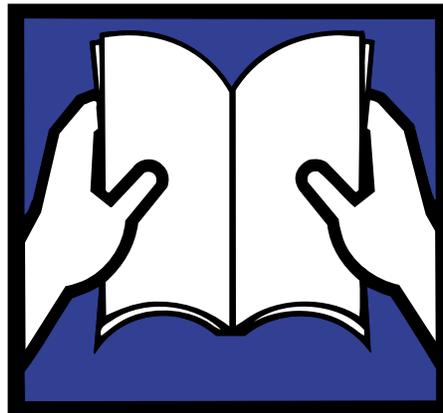
Copies of *How to Get Yes for an Answer* are available from the NALC Supply Dept., 100 Indiana Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20001. ■

# Two cases of unnecessary notes

The right to use personal sick leave to care for ill or injured family members was established in a Memorandum of Understanding contained in the 1994 *National Agreement*. The Memorandum, dated August 19, 1995, entitles carriers to use up to 80 hours of their sick leave each year to care for family members.

The language of the Memorandum is straightforward (see “Know your contract,” page 9). Yet Postal Service supervisors seem to be confused about this provision, as two recent arbitration decisions indicate. In both cases, the supervisors required that carriers bring in medical documentation after taking a single day of sick leave for dependent care. In both cases, the carriers were forced to make special trips to obtain such notes. And in both cases, the arbitrators upheld the NALC’s grievance of the supervisors’ requirement for doctors’ notes, requiring that the Postal Service pay the carriers for the time and expense they incurred in obtaining the unnecessary notes.

These cases should remind NALC stewards to continue close monitoring of supervisors’ actions. Regardless of whether dependent care is involved or not, the requirement to bring a doctor’s note is unnecessary except in three specific circumstances—if the carrier is absent for more than 3 days, if the carrier is already on restricted sick leave or when the supervisor deems documentation is desirable for the protection of the interests of the Postal Service. By mistakenly requiring documentation, postal supervisors not only create needless inconvenience—they also insult the integrity of letter carriers.



## The facts

Case One (C-18462) began in May 1996, when a letter carrier called in to his post office to report that his son had become sick as the carrier was driving the child to day care. The carrier went back home with his son, calling in from his cell phone to report that he would be using one day of his sick leave for dependent care. That evening, a time clerk called the carrier and said that the carrier would be required to produce documentation when the carrier came back to work.

The next day when the carrier reported to work, he offered a note he had written that explained his absence. His supervisor refused to accept the note, telling the carrier he could take annual leave for the day. Subsequently, the carrier provided a note written by someone at the day care center stating that the carrier’s son had been sick on his arrival at the center and that the carrier had taken his son back home. Postal Service management accepted this letter and granted sick leave for dependent care. The carrier grieved the refusal to grant sick leave for dependent care without documentation, and that

grievance proceeded without resolution to arbitration.

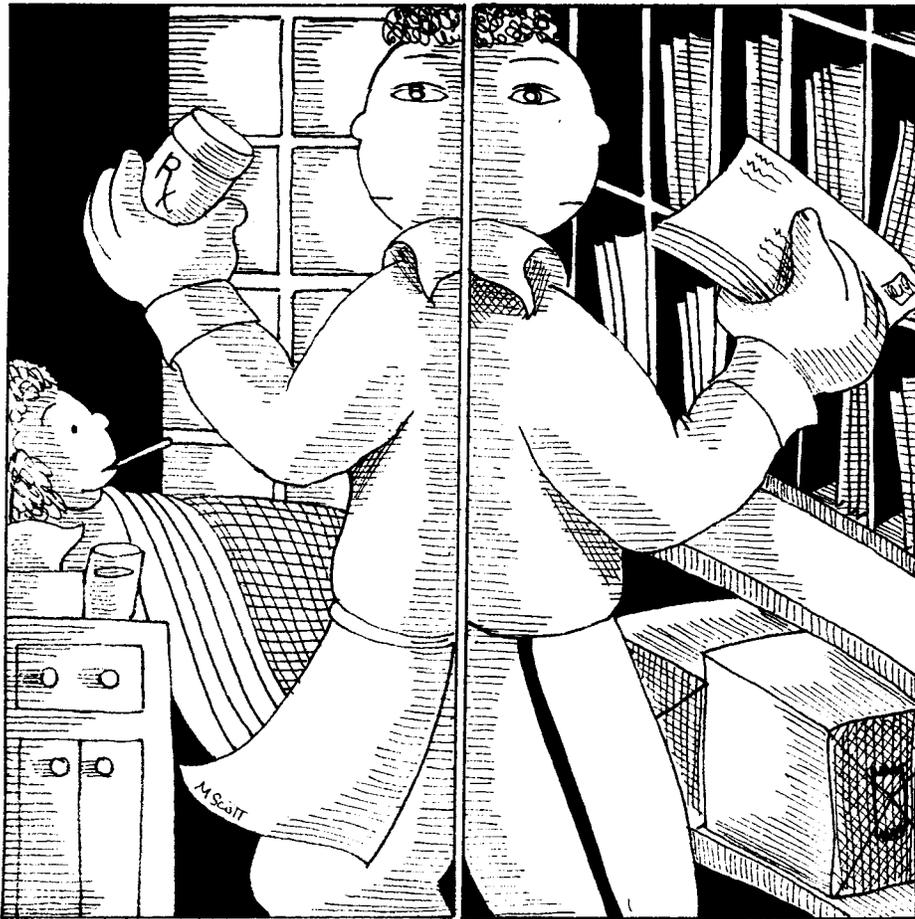
The facts of Case Two (C-18452) are similar. Again, a carrier called in requesting sick leave for dependent care because his son was ill. The carrier’s supervisor told the carrier that documentation would be required. The next day when the carrier returned to work, he provided a note he had written stating that his son had been ill. The supervisor refused to take the note and insisted on “proper medical documentation from a medical doctor.”

After casing his mail, the carrier took sick leave for the remainder of the day and drove his son to the doctor for a medical excuse. The carrier then grieved the refusal to grant sick leave for dependent care without documentation, and this grievance also proceeded to arbitration.

## NALC’s position

In both cases, the union’s argument was the same. The supervisors’ demands to produce “documentation” is not supported by any language in the *National Agreement* or the *ELM*. As the NALC advocate stated in arguing Case Two, “The same type of proof is necessary for family leave as for personal sick leave.” As detailed in the *ELM*, **for absences of three days or less**, supervisors can require medical documentation or “other acceptable evidence” only when the employee is on restricted sick leave or when the supervisor believes that documentation is desirable “for the protection of the interests of the Postal Service.”

In neither case were the grievants on restricted sick leave. On the con-



trary, both had excellent attendance records. And in neither case, the union advocates argued, did the Postal Service produce any evidence that the supervisors in question were protecting the interests of the Postal Service.

In Case One, in which the grievant returned to the day care center for documentation, the union asked that the grievant be paid for time and expenses to obtain that note and also be given eight hours of administrative leave.

In Case Two, the grievant took sick leave for part of a day to obtain a doctor's note for his son. As a remedy in that case, the NALC asked that the grievant be reimbursed for the cost of the doctor's visit and mileage, and that the time the grievant used to get the note be converted from sick leave to administrative leave.

## USPS position

In both cases, the Postal Service advocates argued that the *ELM* in fact permits a supervisor to ask for medical documentation for any kind of sick leave, including sick leave for dependent care. In Case One, the advocate cited language in the *ELM*, Section 511.45, that states in part, "Employees are expected to maintain their assigned schedule and must make every effort to avoid unscheduled absences. In addition, employees must provide acceptable evidence for absences when required."

## The arbitrator rules

Although each of the above cases had a different arbitrator, both arbitrators used similar reasoning in reaching their decisions. Both pointed out

that the absences in question were for one day only, so the *ELM*'s requirement for medical documentation for absences of more than three days does not apply. Both arbitrators also note that the grievant in each case had an excellent attendance record, and neither had been placed on restricted sick leave.

Both arbitrators then considered the meaning of the language in the *ELM* stating that a supervisor can require medical documentation when the supervisor determines that such documentation is "desirable for the protection of the interests of the Postal Service."

The arbitrator in Case One wrote, "If one invokes that portion of the *ELM*, one must then explain what interests they were protecting and what factors or conditions drove one to conclude that something was woefully amiss." The arbitrator in Case Two wrote, "If the supervisor believes that it is necessary for the best interests of the Postal Service, then **the burden of proof shifts to that supervisor** and he or she is required to affirmatively prove why it is necessary" (emphasis added).

Because the Postal Service did not attempt to show any such proof, the arbitrator in Case Two concluded that the supervisor had been "over zealous." In Case One, the arbitrator himself considered whether the facts as they had been presented offered any support to management's claim that the decision to require documentation was "in the interests of the Service."

As the arbitrator noted, the issue was not that the post office had been inconvenienced by the grievant's absence, as the supervisor was perfectly willing to grant annual leave. And in any case, as the arbitrator wrote, "Avoiding inconvenience does not rise to the level of protecting the interests of the Postal Service."

The arbitrator also noted that there was no reason on the record to doubt the grievant's claim of why he was absent, as his time and attendance record is "admirable."

In both cases, therefore, there was no evidence whatsoever that the Postal Service's interests were compromised or that the grievants were time abusers. The arbitrators ruled that management had no reason to require medical documentation and by doing so, had violated the contract.

The arbitrator in Case Two went on to express dismay that management at higher levels of the grievance process had "merely rubber stamped their denial of the grievance." The arbitrator assumed this denial was based on the fact that the administrators in question did not read the appropriate paragraphs of the *National Agreement* and the *ELM*. Such a failure, the arbitrator wrote, "not only adds to the excessive amount of back arbitrations but also adds to the cost of the grievance process. More important, it has an adverse effect on employee morale."

As a remedy in Case One, involving the day care center, the arbitrator ordered that postal management reimburse the carrier for time and mileage

“  
Such an award  
is highly unusual.  
”

spent to obtain documentation from the day care center. In addition, the arbitrator awarded the grievant four hours of administrative leave as a deterrent to future violations.

## Know your contract: Sick leave for dependent care

**C**ontract language stating the right to use personal sick leave for dependent care is contained in a Memorandum of Understanding dated August 19, 1995, that is part of the *National Agreement*. It reads as follows:

“Re: Sick Leave for Dependent Care The parties agree that, during the term of the 1994 National Agreement, sick leave may be used by an employee to give care or otherwise attend to a family member with an illness, injury or other condition which, if an employee had such condition, would justify the use of sick leave by that employee. Family members shall include son or daughter, parent, and spouse as defined in *ELM* Section 515.2. Up to 80 hours of sick

leave may be used for dependent care in any leave year. Approval of sick leave for dependent care will be subject to normal procedures for leave approval.”

Relevant language in the *ELM* appears in Section 513.361, Documentation Requirements: Three Days or Less, and reads as follows:

“For periods of absence of 3 days or less, supervisors may accept the employees' statement explaining the absence. Medical documentation or other acceptable evidence of incapacity for work is required only when the employee is on restricted sick leave (see 513.37) or when the supervisor deems documentation desirable for the protection of the interests of the Postal Service.” ■

It's worth noting that such an award is highly unusual for a first offense. Although the arbitrator did not specifically state his opinion of management's action, experienced stewards can infer that the arbitrator must have felt very strongly that management was wrong in this case.

In Case Two, in which the grievant had to take his son to the doctor for documentation, the arbitrator ordered that the grievant be reimbursed for "out-of-pocket" expenses for that trip plus the cost of paying the doctor.

### Note to stewards

These cases offer valuable lessons to stewards. Although it may seem like a trivial thing to grieve a requirement to produce a doctor's note, the carriers in both cases were not only burdened with an unnecessary task—

they also experienced a gratuitous insult. Both carriers had proved themselves to be reliable, dependable employees. Yet their word was called into question and doubts raised about their personal integrity—all for no reason.

In today's workplace, letter carriers expect and should receive dignity and respect as well as fair treatment. By pursuing these grievances, the NALC steward in each case affirmed these basic rights.

Further, the resolution of these cases underscores the importance of monitoring supervisors' actions. As is evident from the facts as presented in this story, Postal Service management continues to be woefully ignorant of basic contract provisions. NALC stewards remain the best and strongest vanguard of letter carrier rights. ■

# Building effective newsletters: Writing the story everyone wants to read

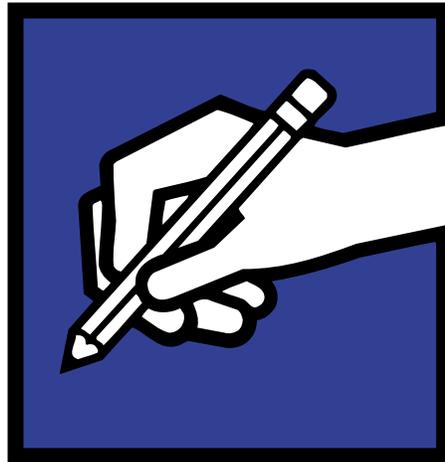
**B**ranch newsletters can be a powerful tool for NALC branch leaders and stewards. Lively, well-written articles can not only provide essential information, but can also motivate and “unionize” otherwise uninvolved members. As the saying goes, the pen is mightier than the sword.

How can branch leaders, stewards and other activists achieve these goals? Pay attention to **key elements of the writing process** to ensure that all newsletter articles are strong, convincing and—most important—read and understood by all your members.

In this story, four newsletter editors offer their suggestions for writing articles that members can’t resist reading. These editors—Roger Bills of Santa Barbara, California Branch 290, Thom Green of Fort Wayne, Indiana Branch 116, Mark Lesch of Ontario, California Branch 1439 and Javier Rodriguez of South Florida Branch 1071—all won awards in NALC’s national Branch Publication Competition for 1996-98 and discussed their work during the 61<sup>st</sup> national convention at Las Vegas, Nevada.

“The branch newsletter is the best way to tell our side,” says South Florida’s Javier Rodriguez. “For a lot of members, reading the newsletter is the most exposure they get to the union. Articles should be helpful, with the information carriers need to know.” At the same time, Rodriguez and other editors agree that the newsletter should intrigue, entertain and inspire members.

“There’s nothing wrong with stirring up some emotion, expressing ideas that will get people talking,”



notes Ontario’s Mark Lesch. “You should write about what makes you mad, the injustices and petty tyrannies we all endure. Those are the things people want to read about, the stories that get people involved.”

As these editors reveal, the best way to create an effective newsletter article is to follow a four-step process. First, **prepare** beforehand by thinking about what you want to say and, if necessary, researching issues you want to discuss. Then conduct focused **interviews** to obtain necessary information. When you are ready to **write**, follow some basic rules to facilitate that process and strengthen your story. Finally, go back and **rewrite**, which may well be the most important step, these editors note.

Other helps for writers appear in the box on page 12, which suggests some additional resources and information about the International Labor Communications Association.

## Getting started

Most branch newsletter articles fall into one of three categories: factual

reports—the “news”; opinion pieces; and feature stories focused on something or someone not in the news—perhaps a profile of a member or a historical article. What you will do before writing—your prework—varies depending on the type of article.

News stories—for example, the announcement of a grievance award—demand a straightforward approach. You will need to know and include answers to the “W” questions—who, what, when, where, why.

For such stories, Fort Wayne’s Thom Green usually writes down the questions that should be answered by the story. Then he decides who—or what—would be the best sources for that information. “I may go through the contract and manuals as a start,” he says. “Or there may be one person that can answer all the questions—maybe the branch president or someone in the NBA’s office.” During such an interview, Green uses the questions he’s written ahead of time, but stays alert to follow up on any new information that his source may share.

Gathering information for feature stories can be less formal, the editors note. “If I’m going to profile somebody, I usually just go in to talk to them and see how it goes,” says Rodriguez. “For example, one of our regular features is about people who are 25-year members. I have a few standard questions, but mostly we talk about what that person is interested in, which I don’t really know ahead of time. Then when I write about them, I use the most interesting parts of what we talked about.”

The third category of newsletter

articles—the opinion piece—offers the opportunity to present your take on the letter carrier's world. There are really no rules or guidelines for these pieces, save the general rules about libel with which all newsletter writers should be familiar. (See the box below for a source for these rules.)

“Some of the best stories I've written have been kind of off-the-wall,” says Rodriguez. “A few years back I did a series featuring a supervisor called Sam Slime—the members loved it, and even my station manager said it was the funniest thing he'd ever read.”

Santa Barbara's Roger Bills emphasizes the importance of writing to entertain yourself. “I like to try different kinds of things all the time,” he says. “I write about my personal experiences. Once I wrote an opinion piece about the Postal Service that I wove into a story of a hiking trip to Yosemite. I used hiking and what happened to me on the trip as kind of a frame for the story.”

Some writing experts recommend using your own feelings and instincts as a guide for writing all kinds of articles. Former journalist William Zinsser, whose book, *On Writing Well*, is required reading in most journalism classes, writes, “You are writing for yourself. Don't worry about whether the reader will 'get it' if you



**Award-winning newsletter editors Thom Green, Xavier Rodriguez, Roger Bills and Mark Lesch lead panel discussion at 1998 NALC convention.**

indulge a sudden impulse for humor or nonsense. If it amuses you in the act of writing, put it in. (It can always be taken out later, but only you can put it in.) You are writing primarily to entertain yourself, and if you go about it with confidence you will also entertain the readers.”

## Just do it

So now you've got your information or formed your opinions and you plan to write to entertain yourself. So how do you get started? For many writers, this is always the most challenging moment.

Sometimes you can use crutches. As noted above, straightforward news stories may demand a standard lead

paragraph containing the answers to all the “W” questions. State who, what, where, when and so on. However, you might have more success attracting readers—and have more fun in the writing process—if you focus on what really caught your interest as you were researching or thinking about the story.

It's also important to keep your story flowing and maintain the initial interest you have sparked in readers with your intriguing lead.

Here are some pointers from an ILCA booklet written by Louise Welsh, who teaches writing at the George Meany Center.

- **Write simply and directly.** Writing should be as casual as speaking, so use a conversational tone.
- **Use active verbs.** As Welsh suggests, “Use verbs that strike, soothe, grin, cry, vote, vex and glide.” Avoid the passive voice. Don't write, “A vote was taken.” Write, “The members voted.”
- **Use words your reader can picture.** Be specific; use concrete nouns and avoid abstract words. A great example comes from Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* (see box on page 12), comparing “A period of unfavorable weather set in.” to “It rained every day for a week.”

## Libel: Getting help

**W**riters and editors of NALC local newsletters are no strangers to threats of lawsuits for libel. It is generally true that people are much more likely to threaten to sue than to actually follow through with a legal action charging libel. However, you should know the basics of libel law.

A basic guideline to libel is available from the International Labor Communications Association. This four-page review includes definitions and the important exceptions to libel that apply to union publications. Request a copy by writing the ILCA, 815 16th Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20006. ■

- **Avoid jargon.** You may assume all your readers know what DPS stands for, as an obvious example. But spell it out the first time you use it. Fort Wayne's Thom Green says he always spells out every acronym, even NALC, when it first appears in an article.
- **Eliminate unnecessary words.** Again, from Strunk and White: "Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell."

## Time to rewrite

Everybody knows the lead paragraph is important—it hooks the reader into the story. At the same time, you can always go back and tinker with the lead, so don't worry about getting everything perfect the first time around. Some sources even suggest writing the lead last, after you have written the rest of the story. You may discover that a startling fact or quote springs out of the body of the story and demands to be your lead paragraph.

"The important thing is to get down all your ideas," says South Florida's Rodriguez. "Then you can look over the whole piece and decide how to order the ideas, how to rephrase things, tighten the writing and make it stronger."

Although you wrote your first draft to entertain yourself, you might want to imagine a reader looking over your shoulder as you tackle the rewrite. What does that sentence mean? Who are you referring to? What's your source? These are questions your

# Resources for writers

A visit to any bookstore will most likely overwhelm you with the vast numbers of books that exist about writing. Most veteran writers, however, rely on one or two time-tested and reliable guides to good writing.

Most often cited is *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White. At less than 100 pages, this masterpiece sums up just about every aspect of the writing process, from usage to structure to style. "It's also just plain fun to read," says South Florida newsletter editor Javier Rodriguez. "I couldn't work without it."

Another reliable resource for writing nonfiction is William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*. Originally published in 1976, the book has gone through a number of revisions. The updated version contains a chapter on writing with a word processor, in addition to chapters on principles of good writing and advice on how to write various kinds of articles.

For inspiration, enjoyment and a different perspective, writers should check out Anne Lamott's book on writing, *Bird By Bird*. Filled with her own experiences, the book contains, according to the *New York*

*Times*, "Superb writing advice; hilarious, helpful and provocative."

Another valuable resource for NALC newsletter editors is the International Labor Communications Association.

ILCA membership is open to national, regional and local union publications affiliated with the AFL-CIO. Dues are calculated on a sliding scale based on circulation size and the nature of the organization. ILCA members receive several bimonthly publications and can subscribe to a monthly graphics service.

The ILCA also offers Nancy Brigham's *How To Do Leaflets, Newsletters and Newspapers*, which contains not only advice on research, interviewing and writing, but also nuts-and-bolts information about newsletter production. The book is \$10 from the ILCA. For \$27.50, the ILCA sells the 1995 *ILCA Editors's Guide* that includes advice on working with the media and explanations of labor terms and labor law; Louise Welsh's booklet, *Writing Tips*, is available for \$5.25.

To order publications or obtain information about membership, write the ILCA at 815 16th Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20006. ■

imaginary reader may pose, and for the sake of clarity and accuracy you should let that person speak.

Above all, don't become discouraged with what you've written. As writer Anne Lamott points out in her wonderful book on writing, *Bird By Bird*, "Very few writers really know what they are doing until they've

done it. Nor do they go about their business feeling dewy and thrilled. They do not type a few stiff warm-up sentences and then find themselves bounding along like huskies across the snow. We all often feel like we are pulling teeth, even those writers whose prose ends up being the most natural and fluid." ■

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16: Can management impose 'blanket' discipline?; Vol. 13, #2; Sp 1998, pp. 11-12.

17: Postal inspectors and carrier rights: Asking, answering questions (illus);

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19: Defining 'the contract': Handbooks and manuals (photo); Vol. 13, #3; Su 1998, pp. 5-6.

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Working smarter with fewer interruptions; Vol. 13, #4; F 1998, pp. 13-14.

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**ADMINISTRATION & FINANCE.**

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**WORKERS' COMPENSATION**

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**NOTICE:** NALC branch leaders and stewards who wish to have a complete index of the *NALC Activist* may obtain one by writing the NALC Information Center, 100 Indiana Avenue, N. W., Washington, D.C. 20001. The Cumulative *Activist* Index covers Volumes 1-13, 1986-1998.



# Regional Training Seminars

Listed below are regional training and educational seminars scheduled to begin before May 1, 1999. For more information, contact your national business agent.

## **Atlanta Region (Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina)**

February 27-28, Georgia State Association Training Seminar, Atlanta N.E. Hilton, Norcross, GA.

March 6-7, South Carolina State Association Training Seminar, Columbia, SC.

March 26-27, North Carolina State Association Training Seminar, Four Points Sheraton, Raleigh, NC.

April 30-May 1, South Carolina State Association State Convention, Crown Plaza Hotel, Greenville, SC.

National Business Agent Matthew Rose, (954) 964-2116.

## **District of Columbia Region (Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia)**

January 17-18, Shop Steward Training, Parkersburg, WV.

January 26-27, Shop Steward

Training, Washington, DC.

January 31-February 2, Shop Steward Training, Williamsburg, VA.

February 9, Shop Steward Training, Wilmington, DE.

February 10, Shop Steward Training, Milford, DE.

March 7-9, Virginia State Congressional Conference, Washington, DC.

April 11-13, Regional Officers Training, Daniels, WV.

National Business Agent Dick Gentry, (410) 813-2130.

## **Minneapolis Region (Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin)**

March 20, Wisconsin State Association NW District Meeting, Marshfield, WI.

March 23, Wisconsin State Association NE District Meeting, Appleton, WI.

March 24, Wisconsin State Association SE District Meeting, to be determined.

March 25, Wisconsin State Association SW District Meeting, Madison, WI.

April 9-11, South Dakota State

Association Convention, Yankton, SD.

April 23-25, North Dakota State Association Training Seminar, Bismarck, ND.

April 26-30, Regional Training Seminar, Holiday Inn Metrodome, Minneapolis, MN.

National Business Agent Barry Weiner, (612) 378-3035.

## **Philadelphia Region (Pennsylvania and southern New Jersey)**

February 21-23, Regional RAP Session, Trump Plaza, Atlantic City, NJ.

National Business Agent Tim O'Malley, (215) 824-4826.

## **St. Louis Region (Iowa, Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska)**

February 20-21, Regional Rap Session, St. Louis, MO.

April 16-18, Nebraska State Convention and Training Seminar, Omaha, NE.

April 30-May 1, Kansas State Association State Training Seminar, Topeka, KS.

National Business Agent Joe Miller, (314) 872-0227.

# ACTIVIST

NALC

A NEWSLETTER FOR BRANCH LEADERS OF THE  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF LETTER CARRIERS



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