



1929-1949

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

It was around noon on October 24, 1929, when the stock market began to crumble. By 2:30 p.m. the ticker tape was almost two hours late, and five days later, on October 29, it was all over. The stock market had crashed and the Great Depression was soon to follow.

Almost immediately, unemployment began to mount at the rate of 4,000 workers per week, and then the ranks of the jobless seemed to have no limits. Four million were unemployed in 1930, 11 million in 1932, nearly 13 million by 1933. Thousands upon thousands of workers—unable to meet mortgage payments or pay rent—lost their homes. Many of the newly poor built homes of scrap metal and egg crates in city dumps. Bread and soup lines stretched endlessly through the nation's cities. Some lived on bread and coffee; others picked over garbage cans to feed their families.

William Green, president of the American Federation of Labor, told a congressional committee in 1930 that in Detroit, Michigan, “the men are sitting in the parks all day long and all night long, hundreds and thousands of them—muttering to themselves, ‘out of work, seeking work.’” And in the summer of 1932, people were marching in Washington, DC’s Anacostia Flats singing:

Mellon pulled the whistle
Hoover rang the bell
Wall Street gave the signal
—And the country went to Hell.*

*Andrew Mellon, a powerful banker and industrialist, was Secretary of the Treasury at the time.

Letter carriers and other postal employees found themselves in a strange situation during the early days of the Depression. Before the Depression, most Americans considered the average pay of a letter carrier—\$2,064 per year—a mediocre salary. But during the Depression, it was an enviable amount of money. And in a nation of 13 million unemployed, the security of postal jobs made such positions even more attractive. In 1933, a letter carrier from Oregon described this ironic reversal:

All my neighbors are out of work, and if I go to them and cry about my condition they think I am crazier now than I was five years ago when they used to tell me to throw away that mail sack and get a decent job. Now, any one of them would be glad to carry mail for a dollar a day...

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that letter carrier and postal clerk positions attracted some of the country's best educated people—who in easier times might have become lawyers, doctors or teachers. Jerome J. Keating, president of the NALC from 1962 to 1968, was a notable example of this phenomenon. Keating became a substitute carrier in March 1924 to help pay his way through college. After graduating from the University of Minnesota in 1930, he had the opportunity to become an instructor and later a professor. But Keating decided to remain a letter carrier because a letter carrier's job offered more security during the Great Depression than that of a college teacher.

If, like Keating, letter carriers were relatively fortunate compared to many other workers, the Depression nonetheless affected them in very significant and often devastating ways. As the Depression deepened, a drive to slash the wages of all government employees gained momentum, grew steadily, and culminated in Hoover's



Economy Act of 1932. This law authorized the first wage reductions in the history of the federal service: one month's furlough per year for every government employee. For letter carriers, this meant an $8\frac{1}{3}$ percent decrease in wages.

The election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in late 1932 only aggravated the situation for letter carriers. Most people remember Roosevelt as a president who tried to alleviate widespread suffering and revive the American economy through "New Deal" legislation. However, on the campaign trail in 1932, he espoused a far different political philosophy. Roosevelt had campaigned against Hoover on a platform of government economy, and he even had gone so far as to promise to cut government spending to the bone and balance the national budget—campaign promises that did not bode well for any government worker. True to his

UNIFORM ALLOWANCE



When free city delivery was established in 1863, the first letter carriers were not required to wear uniforms. Five years later, however, Congress authorized the use of uniforms and Postmaster General Alexander W. Randall issued an order prescribing a mandatory uniform for letter carriers:

A single-breasted Sack Coat ... with five brass buttons ... pants of same material with fine broadcloth stripe one half inch wide down each leg...

In those early days, letter carriers were forced to pay for their own uniforms, a large expense considering their meager salaries. And while uniform styles have changed with the times, the burden of purchasing uniforms remained with letter carriers for another 86 years. Finally, in 1954, Congress passed a Uniform Allowance Act, providing letter carriers with \$100 per year to purchase their uniforms. Since the advent of collective bargaining in 1971, the union has negotiated the amount of the allowance. As a result, the allowance has increased over the years in an effort to keep pace with rising uniform costs and the larger selection of approved items carriers are authorized to wear.



word, on March 20, 1933—just 16 days after taking office—Roosevelt replaced Hoover's furloughs with a straight 15 percent salary cut. This drastic cut, combined with a subsequent nine-day furlough for postal workers, reduced letter carriers' wages to their 1916 level.

What effect did these reductions have on letter carriers and their families? A few quotations from a questionnaire the NALC sent out to its members in 1933 illustrate some of the hardship:

Had to call the doctor last month on account of sickness and he claims all the children [7] are undernourished and [yet] I am spending all my salary on food and the barest of necessities.

I certainly hope we get back to full pay very soon, for I for one cannot hold out much longer. The Federal man has been about the only one with a job the past two years and all his relations and friends look to him for assistance. I do not believe there is a man in our office that is not helping friends and relatives...

Unless some relief is given, we will be forced to take our boys out of school.

For village carriers, whose pay was \$750 a year less than city carriers, life was even harder:

My wife lost her job clerking in a store for \$12 per week, because the public thought that both of us were not entitled to a job. Within the last year my father and sister have lost their jobs and that puts three more for me to feed, clothe and keep warm.

Hardest hit by the Depression, however, were substitute carriers. City subs earned 65 cents an hour and village subs earned as little as 50 cents an hour—meager wages even before the 15 percent wage reduction. The steep decline in postal business forced the Department to reduce deliveries and other services, making it impossible for subs to work enough hours to survive. For example, in many large city offices substitutes earned as little as \$6 a week. Finally, Hoover's Economy Act of 1932 prohibited the filling of most regular vacancies in the postal service—a cruel and devastating setback for subs whose very livelihoods were dependent upon advancement.

Deeply concerned about the plight of the subs, regular carriers came to their assistance. In Oklahoma City, regular letter carriers announced their willingness to take leave without pay, and in Glendale, California, they agreed to go on vacation—in both cases so that subs would have some work. The Glendale scribe wrote in a 1934 *Postal Record*:

Regular carriers are not having such a good time or making too much, but we are not starving and we should be willing to give a day's work per month to aid a brother.

In Wichita, Kansas, the branch formed a special sub-relief organization to supply funds to needy subs and their families.

Substitutes tried to help themselves, too. A committee of subs from Cleveland, Ohio, traveled to Washington in 1933 to present their plight to the Roosevelt Administration. Subs in several large cities joined with other substitute postal workers to form their own organization, the National Association of Substitute Postal Employees, because they thought the established unions were neglecting their problems. Although the claim was not true, their impatience with the NALC's and other postal unions' progress was understandable. Desperate and undoubtedly influenced by the large number of strikes and demonstrations all across America, these subs decided to voice their complaints. They marched on Washington, DC in 1934 demanding a "job for every substitute."

In the face of the government's massive attack on their members' livelihoods, NALC President Edward J. Gainor and National Secretary Michael T. Finnan lobbied continuously for wage restoration for all government workers and relief for substitutes. In a 1934 "Memorial to

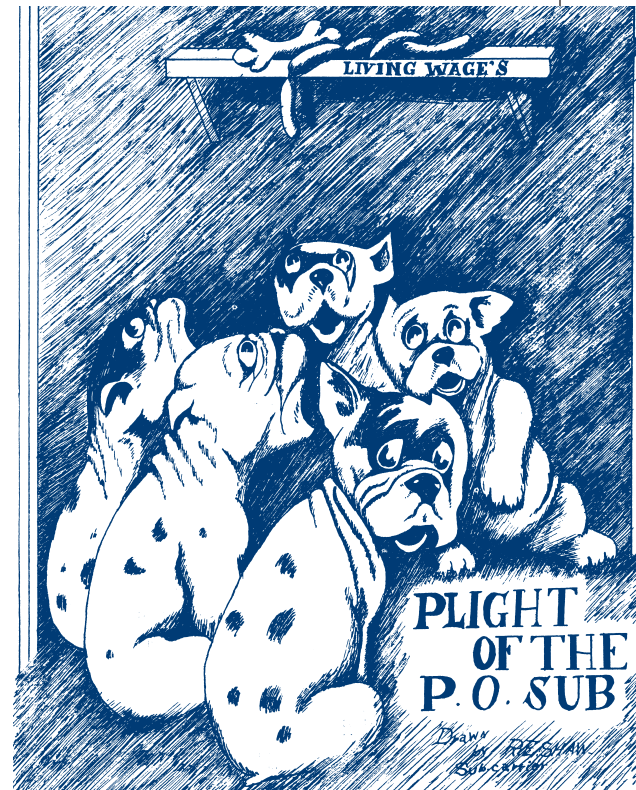
Congress," the NALC presented impressive documentation that carriers' wages were already inadequate before the wage reductions, and that the hardship caused by the reductions far outweighed any possible benefits. The wage reductions, the NALC further argued, were having no appreciable effect on balancing the budget.

Ultimately, yet unintentionally, the Roosevelt administration aided the NALC in its fight for pay restoration. During 1933 and 1934 Roosevelt was urging civilian employers to maintain high wages and shorten the working hours of their employees to get the economy moving again. At the same time the administration insisted on continuing the 15 percent salary reduction for all government employees. The NALC called this policy "insincere and inconsistent." A letter carrier highlighted the contradiction in a 1934 *Postal Record*:

Is the government going to have one policy for industry and another for their own employees? How long can the administration urge industry to increase wages and shorten hours and force their own employees to do the opposite? What will be the fate of the fight for wage restoration?

The NALC and other postal and federal organizations finally won the fight. The wages of all government employees were completely restored by April 1935. And by the end of the decade, substitute carriers obtained some relief when a bill giving them their

The 15 percent salary cut, combined with a subsequent nine-day furlough for postal workers, reduced letter carriers' wages to their 1916 level.



THE MAILMAN

*He goes around from house to house
And rings the bell or knocks
When there is something to be slipped
Inside the letter box.*

*His pouch is filled with messages
Of happiness and cheer
And also those that draw a frown
Or possibly a tear.*

*He brings the blanks for income tax
And statements by the score,
As well as word from Uncle Sam
That it's time to go to war.*

*He carries papers, magazines,
And ads of every sort,
Besides the V-mail letters from
The farthest foreign port.*

*He is the messenger of love,
Surprise and tragedy,
He is the constant carrier
Of time and memory.*

*So while I'm over here fighting
And going through all this hell,
You just keep on delivering letters
To Mrs. Paul L.*

—S/Sgt. Paul L. Scheliam



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first annual and sick leave benefits was passed on July 18, 1939.

A POWER STRUGGLE EMERGES

For the American labor movement, the Great Depression was a period of turmoil and change. At the beginning, the number of union members plunged as more and more workers joined the ranks of the unemployed. By 1933, however, hundreds of thousands of industrial workers were knocking at the doors of AFL unions seeking the benefits of organization. Yet many AFL unions were unable or unwilling to let them in. Then, in the middle of the decade, a group of unions committed to organizing industrial workers bolted from the AFL to form the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). These CIO unions quickly mounted successful organizing campaigns in auto, steel and other mass production industries.

In contrast, the NALC maintained its affiliation with the AFL and survived the period largely insulated from the cross-currents that buffeted many other unions. This is not to say, however, that the leadership of the NALC came out of this experi-

ence unscathed. For Edward J. Gainor, president of the NALC since 1914, the Great Depression precipitated the beginning of the end of his administration.

Although trouble for Gainor and other officers of the NALC did not become serious until 1938, signs of discontent within the membership were evident earlier. In 1933, a small number of carriers—unhappy with the wage reductions—began to criticize the union leadership in *The Postal Record*, and the NALC convention in Atlantic City that year was combative.

Restoration of wages in 1935, however, helped mollify some of the discontented members. Then, in the late 1930s, as war broke out in Europe and the cost of living began to rise, letter carriers grew more and more dissatisfied with their 1925 wages. Not surprisingly, a call for new leadership and more militant tactics at the national level was heard.

The first overt step in the power struggle between the established leadership—the “Old Guard,” as they were called—and younger, more militant members within the NALC was ironically taken in President Gainor’s home state of Indiana. In 1938, Indianapolis Branch 39 and 27 other branches petitioned for a national referendum to amend the NALC Constitution. The so-called Hoosier Amendment, which called for the election of national officers by direct mail balloting rather than by convention delegates, was aimed directly at the Old Guard. Seventy-two percent of the membership voted in the referendum, and the proposed amendment was defeated on April 15,

1939 by a 3½-to-1 majority. Gainor had won the first round.

The scene of the next stage in the struggle for power was the NALC's Golden Anniversary Convention, held in the city of its birth, Milwaukee, on September 4, 1939. From the moment the convention opened, tension filled the air. The "Hoosier Amendment" may have been defeated five months earlier, but the incident was not forgotten by Gainor or the delegates in attendance. In addition, Great Britain and France had declared war on Germany the day before the convention opened—a sobering event which, as one can imagine, increased delegates' anxiety.

The convention opened on an uproarious note when a rowdy group of letter carriers who were not official delegates attempted to speak. A cross-fire of cheers and calls to "throw them out!" immediately erupted. Only after President Gainor threatened to have the police haul the dissidents from the room was the convention able to continue with its normal business.

The afternoon of the third day, when the Committee of Resolutions read Resolution 70 to the delegates, was the moment of highest drama. Resolution 70 proposed to amend the

NALC Constitution to prohibit any national officer from standing for reelection upon reaching the age of 65. If adopted, the resolution would have blocked four of the top NALC officers, including Gainor, from running for office in 1941. The convention floor exploded into an uproar over this proposal, and after a noisy and often acrimonious debate, a voice vote defeated Resolution 70. Gainor had once again prevailed.

His troubles, however, did not end on that tumultuous afternoon in 1939. In the months following the convention, there was no progress on the legislative front, and dissatisfaction within the rank and file was rampant. Fourteen years without a wage increase was far too long. Then, as the 1941 convention approached, Gainor chose to run for re-election, instead of retiring as many people hoped he would do. There was a feeling that the organization was reaching a point of crisis, and a way out had to be found.

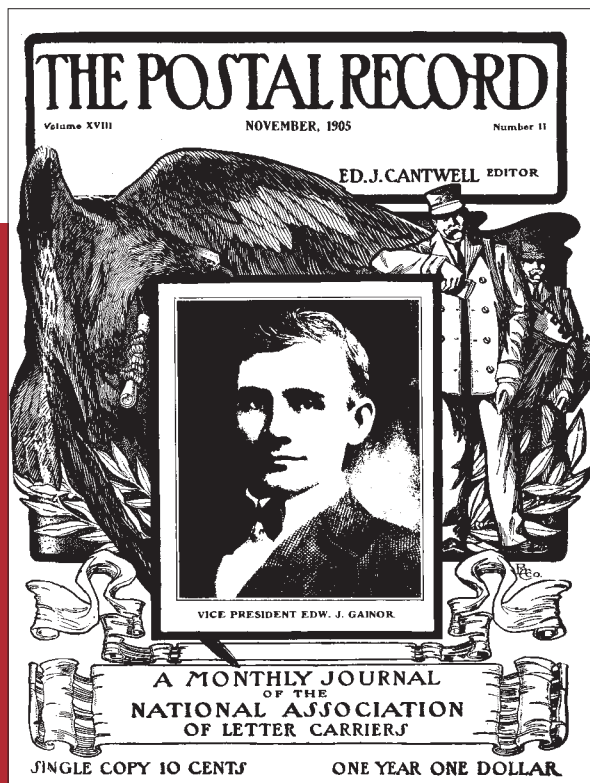
Two key events then happened back-to-back. In December 1940, more than 200 branches, led by Branch 1 in

EDWARD GAINOR

FATHER OF THE SHORTER WORK WEEK

Edward Gainor, NALC president from 1914 through 1941, led the long struggle to reduce letter carriers' hours of work from 48 to 40 hours. His eventual success earned him tribute as the "Father of the Shorter Work Week."

Under Gainor's leadership, the NALC secured legislation in 1931 creating a 44-hour work week for carriers, and then a 40-hour week in 1935. Gainor also brought his campaign for shorter working hours to all American workers as vice president of the American Federation of Labor.



Detroit, signed a petition for a referendum to amend the NALC Constitution. The amendment—another version of Resolution 70—provided that no one over 65 could run for national office. One month later, William C. Doherty of Cincinnati's Branch 43, a young member of the Executive Board, chose to make his move. At the semi-annual meeting of the National Executive Board in January 1941, Doherty announced that he was running for president of the NALC. Six of the 21 members of the Board walked out of the room with him, joining the Doherty team.

The next few months were difficult ones for the NALC as the referendum became the battle ground on which the Gainor and Doherty forces fought. Anyone who was for the amendment was against Gainor, and vice versa. There was no middle ground. A carrier from Grand Rapids, Michigan, illustrated the point with his partisan remarks in the February 1941 *Postal Record*:

Let us not try to straddle the fence. Either you are for this dastardly piece of legislation or you are against this vicious attack against our national officers.

On April 5, 1941, the power struggle effectively ended. With almost 90 percent of the members voting, the amendment won by an extremely narrow margin: 26,583 to 23,838. And on September 6, 1941, with no one opposing him, William C. Doherty was elected president of the NALC at the Los Angeles convention.

THE NALC MOBILIZES

Sixteen years without a pay raise—that was the situation letter carriers faced in 1941 and that was why they elected William C. Doherty. Although Congress had arbitrarily slashed their wages during the Great Depression, the cost of living had

declined and carriers were financially better off than many other workers. But the job that had seemed enviable during the Depression once again became undesirable as the economy revived. By 1941, when the economy was expanding, city letter carriers were earning a maximum of \$2,100 while workers in shipyards and other defense industries were now making two to three times more, and many other workers were also earning good wages. Nonetheless, the government greeted letter carriers' requests for a pay increase with stoical indifference. In response, letter carriers were more than frustrated—they were angry at being treated like second-class citizens by their employer, the U.S. Government. A Michigan carrier articulated the majority's feelings in *The Postal Record* when he wrote:

They all talk about the wonderful work the postal employees are doing all over the country, but we have heard that, for... years. That don't help us to buy our food and clothing, that's just a lot of water over the dam; what we want is a raise right now.

In response to this treatment, delegates to the 1941 convention instructed Bill Doherty and the rest of the officers to obtain a \$900 increase, pushing top letter carrier wages to \$3,000 a year. But before Doherty could initiate a major salary campaign, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and America entered World War II. In the next six to eight months, the entire nation mobilized to support the war effort.

Over 15,000 letter carriers joined the armed services to fight for their country. The rest continued to carry the nation's mail, as essential a job in war as in peace. Temporary replacements were sought to fill vacancies, but with wages so low it was difficult to find workers. Many carriers simply absorbed their absent co-workers' duties. In addition, postal employees



were asked to perform extra wartime tasks, such as the distribution of over 120,000,000 ration books. Letter carriers worked long and hard during World War II and they did so willingly, with no complaints, except one: They were having an extremely difficult time feeding their families on 1925 wages.

In 1942, with mobilization of the country's war resources well underway, the young, aggressive Bill Doherty began a campaign for a temporary wartime bonus of \$300 a year. This salary drive was the first in a series of electrifying campaigns that channeled the anger of the membership into a single voice demanding justice.

Doherty's leadership was dynamic and innovative. He seized the offensive immediately. On Saturday night, August 8, 1942, in a "Labor for Victory" broadcast sponsored by the American Federation of Labor, Bill Doherty carried the NALC's message directly to the American people:

G.I. MAILMAN —Louis J. Sanker

*He can march! What of it? The tramp of his feet
Back home had been wearing a trail in the street.
His shoulders that square now to pull off his pack
Had sagged to a load for many years back.
He had hurried along with a militant stride,
for a uniform always was part of his hide—
And the service he gave repaid him in pride.*

*Heat was a hammer, and cold was a claw;
Wind was a razor rasping him raw;
And rain was a deluge drowning desire...
But, stung by the storm, he sheltered his fire;
Elbowed the wind, taunted the rain,
Derided discomfort, made light of his pain—
For a duty well-done was adequate gain.*

*The folks he had served might have measured his worth:
He solaced in death, was joyous in birth;
Kept tight the courage of mother and dad,
Till he knocked on the door with word from the lad.
He treasured their thanks, took pride in their praise—
But it's strange that nobody thought of a raise,
For nigh twenty years never thought of a raise.*



Convention delegates parade in Denver during the 1943 convention.

I think I should explain that the NALC is different from most other unions. We can't strike. In fact, we have no desire to strike, even when conditions are as tough as they are now. That's because the letter carriers are working for Uncle Sam and for you, the people of the United States.... You, the people of the United States, are our boss. We know you want to treat us right. That's why we hate to remind you that you have fallen down on us.

After explaining the dire financial circumstances letter carriers were in, Doherty made his pitch:

I'm speaking tonight to the people who live on every city street and country road in America. I'm speaking to you for the letter carrier who comes your way every day. Your letter carrier has asked me to enlist your help. All you have to do is to write a letter or post-card to your Congressmen.

Local NALC branches repeated and expanded on the same message in broadcasts from their community radio stations. Letter carriers and

women in the National Ladies Auxiliary sent letters to their congressional representatives, community newspapers and labor newspapers, and also sought endorsements from state and central bodies of the AFL. Finally, on April 9, 1943, the salary campaign achieved success, as letter carriers received a \$300-a-year wartime bonus, effective until June 30, 1945.

Bill Doherty, however, did not stop. The wartime bonus was only a short-term solution to an 18-year-old problem. In 1944, he called for another salary campaign to obtain a permanent \$400-a-year pay increase. Needing little prodding from national headquarters, letter carriers responded enthusiastically to his call in a widespread outburst of local actions. In fact, Doherty derived many of his ideas directly from the membership. After Chicago's Branch 11 and a number of branches held large salary rallies, he called for a National Salary Rally Week during October 22-28,



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1944. When carriers from Branch 36 in New York distributed tens of thousands of handbills after work hours to educate the public on the salary issue, the handbill was published in *The Postal Record* and Doherty encouraged other branches to take similar action. No stone was left unturned in this long, arduous, and well-organized campaign. And once again, Doherty and the carriers were victorious: On July 6, 1945, President Harry S. Truman signed a bill giving letter carriers their first permanent pay increase in 20 years.

This victory, important as it was, brought the top salary of letter carriers to only \$2,500—still an inadequate wage and still short of the 1941 NALC convention mandate for a \$900 increase.

On August 14, 1945, the Japanese surrendered and the war ended. Bill Doherty again seized the initiative by arguing that the war could no longer be used by Congress as an excuse for inaction. On August 29—just six weeks after the last pay increase—he called for another campaign to raise wages. His dramatic strategy paid off. With Congress now able to direct its attention to domestic matters, the salary bill sailed through both Houses, and on May 21, 1946 President Truman approved another \$400 a year increase for letter carriers.

Strengthened by these successes, Doherty led the NALC to even greater victories in the immediate post-war years. The union secured passage of 10 important pieces of legislation between 1946 and 1948, including two more pay increases for city carriers. And one of the original objectives of the NALC—equalization of wages for all letter carriers—was finally achieved on October 29, 1949, when a law abolishing village delivery service was enacted, giving city delivery status to all village carriers. For the first

time since July 1, 1863, when 449 modern carriers began to walk the streets of America, city delivery carriers received the same wages regardless of the size of the community in which they worked.

Naturally, letter carriers were ecstatic over their legislative victories. By the end of the 1940s, the job of a letter carrier was beginning to compare favorably with jobs in private industry. Letter carriers' anger and frustration over past congressional delays and inaction dissolved with each victory. Not surprisingly, however, the spectacular campaigns conducted by the NALC antagonized some of the population. An article entitled "Postman Voodoo" in the October 10, 1949 issue of *Newsweek* had this to say:

Congress suffers from a strange occupational ailment. Postmanitis is marked by a high fever and a fluttery stomach; although not fatal, it nevertheless is terrifying. It recurs whenever the legislators start thinking about what might conceivably happen if they ever did anything to make the nation's mail carriers angry. The only cure for it, as far as Congress knows, is simply to vote for everything the postal employees' lobby wants.

These attacks did not faze Bill Doherty. His position was unassailable: Since the NALC was prohibited from collective bargaining and denied the power to strike by its employer, the Congress of the United States, it was the responsibility of Congress to listen and respond to the NALC's petitions. The NALC was not a pressure or special interest group—it was a union.

For the first time since July 1, 1863, when 449 modern carriers began to walk the streets of America, city delivery carriers received the same wages regardless of the size of the community in which they worked.