

Great Postal Strike remembered with videos available online



Above: Carriers from Dearborn, MI, go out on strike.

Below: The strike crippled the nation's ability to send and receive mail.



It started small, but it grew to become the most important event in the modern history of NALC and the Post Office. The Great Postal Strike of 1970 still affects our lives and careers today, and that's why we celebrate its anniversary every March.

The best way to remember this watershed event is through the eyes and voices of those who participated in it.

NALC has posted a pair of videos about the strike on YouTube for anyone who wants to learn about the strike, an event that ushered in dramatic change for the union, its sister unions and postal operations, and led to letter carriers finally achieving collective-bargaining rights.

Tensions boil over

The strike began with a few thousand letter carriers walking off the job in New York City, but the conditions that led carriers in New York Branch 36 to vote to strike had been festering for decades in every station in the country. The only way to get a pay raise was for Congress to vote for one, and lawmakers had failed time and time again to raise postal pay to adequate levels. Because letter carriers and other postal workers had no collective-bargaining rights—they could only ask Congress for better wages and benefits, rather than negotiate for them—labor advocates called their situation “collective begging.”

Low pay caused high turnover, so 1 in 4 letter carriers left their jobs each

year. Some of those who stayed earned so little that they qualified for welfare benefits.

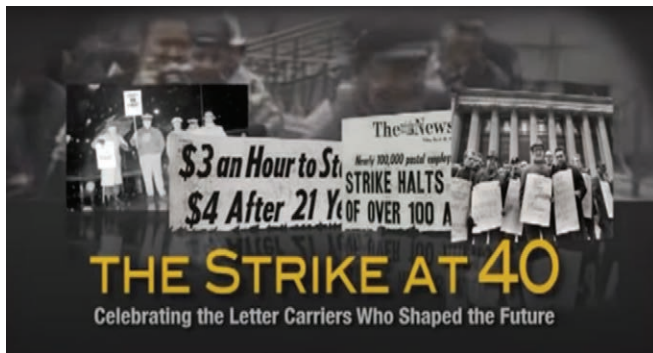
The tension boiled over on March 17, 1970. A congressional committee had voted for a pay raise for postal employees a week earlier, but it only angered them because it was so small. The fact that Congress had raised its own pay by 41 percent the year before didn't help.

Led by rank-and-file letter carrier Vincent Sombrotto, who later became president of the NALC, Branch 36 members voted 1,555 to 1,055 to strike, taking that step even though they lacked the legal right to strike, and risked being arrested.

At midnight, letter carriers set up picket lines in front of post offices in Manhattan and the Bronx. Millions of paychecks, pension checks, bank transfers and other vital mail quickly piled up in New York's post offices, unsorted and undelivered.

Members of other postal unions refused to cross the picket lines. Soon, NALC branches in other parts of the country began voting to join the strike, threatening to make the crisis a national one.

In an attempt to break the spreading strike, President Richard Nixon ordered a group of active duty, reserve and National Guard troops to New York City post offices to deliver 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, they couldn't keep up with a day's mail, let alone the mail already piled up during the strike.



Nixon, convinced by Secretary of Labor George Shultz to take the strike seriously, told Shultz to negotiate an end to the crisis. The Nixon administration ended up agreeing to most of the strikers' demands. Then-NALC President James Rademacher was crucial to this outcome, negotiating a deal that increased postal wages, gave postal employees collective-bargaining rights, and outlined postal reform, while guaranteeing a promise that a public postal system would be preserved. Letter carriers returned to work eight days after the strike began, and the landmark event in NALC's history was over.

Congress kept its promise, adopting major postal reforms that went beyond a simple pay increase for its workers. It passed legislation removing the Post Office Department from the presidential cabinet and creating the Postal Service that we have today—a Postal Service that negotiates pay and benefits with the unions representing its workers, and that funds itself through earned revenue. From that day forward, NALC has represented letter carriers not just in Congress but at the bargaining table.

Preserving history

Since 1970, NALC staff and independent scholars have gathered historical information about the strike to preserve its memory and better understand its effects. This has included many interviews with strike leaders and participants in two films that can be viewed on the union's YouTube channel: youtube.com/ThePostalRecord.

"The Strike at 40" is a 32-minute film produced in 2010 that uses 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. It includes historical footage of the National Guard and other military personnel attempting to fill in for letter carriers.

In 2020, NALC produced a nearly one-and-a-half-hour documentary to add a broader perspective.

"The Revolt of the Good Guys" 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 episode about the strike from the Amazon Prime show "Good Girls Revolt," complete with 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' frustrations led to the strike vote. The film details the actions of the strike with interviews and footage that show 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 af-

ter 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.

The 85-minute documentary, created by Sutherland Media Productions of Washington, DC, won six Telly Awards, the premier awards honoring TV commercials and programs, as well as video and film productions, last year. The awards consisted of a "gold" in the history category and "silvers" for editing, writing, long-form documentaries, education and training, and general information.

"It's important to remember history, and the Great Postal Strike was one of the most important events in NALC's past," NALC President Brian L. Renfroe said. "The strike changed so much, and new letter carriers may not realize just how important it is to their daily lives. The strike had such a dramatic impact for our union, our members and the Postal Service, that I invite carriers to check out these award-winning videos to see up close what happened and to hear it from those who lived it."

The strike was an important event in the history of not just NALC and the nation's postal system, but also the labor movement and the country itself, and NALC wants to preserve this history. There may be important pieces of strike history in letter carriers' attics and branch halls around the country. If you have any items related to the strike that you think the NALC might be interested in, please reach out to NALC Director of Research Holly Feldman-Wiencek at feldman-wiencek@nalc.org or 202-662-2485. **PR**