

# Saving universal service from an economic storm



*William H. Young*

**L**ast year, our focus in the political campaign was to mobilize working people to save the American middle class. Our support for Barack Obama and countless candidates from both parties was grounded in this long-term goal. The economic storm that officially began in December 2007 and turned into a tsunami in September 2008 has added a new item to our agenda: Survival.

The Postal Service faces its most serious threat in more than 75 years. As the real economy has spiraled downward, so has the Postal Service's core business. In recent months, mail volume has declined more rapidly than at any time since the 1930s. Even if we can avert a second Great Depression, saving the Postal Service now must be added to our to-do list for 2009. How's that for a "Happy New Year!"?

Fortunately, we have a lot going for us as we confront this crisis.

First, we have a talented and dynamic new leader in President Barack Obama. He has mobilized a movement for change and has inspired hope at a time when fear could easily overwhelm us. He has assembled a top-notch team of advisers and Cabinet members—including a great Secretary of Labor, Hilda Solis—to help turn the country around. And he has taken charge immediately, working with the new Congress on a bold recovery plan supported by economic experts of all political persuasions. With luck, we can hope for better days ahead in 2009 and 2010.

**Second, we have each other, the members of the National Association of Letter Carriers.** A strong and united union is absolutely essential for the challenges ahead. Indeed, the strength and unity we displayed in 2008 has already put us in a much stronger position to confront the crisis in 2009. Our agreement to prohibit contracting out has effectively closed the low-road to postal management as it reacts to the worsening economy. At the same time, our commitment to jointly and expeditiously adjust routes

demonstrates our capacity to act responsibly in the face of duress.

Finally, our hard work throughout 2008 to influence the results of the Postal Regulatory Commission's study of the cost and value of "Universal Service" really paid off. The PRC study rejected any major changes to the postal monopoly and the definition of universal service, and it endorsed the continuation of six-day delivery and exclusive access for the U.S. Postal Service to Americans' mail boxes. Our testimony at two hearings and our written submissions to the Commission really made a difference.

But the economic crash—what else can you call the evaporation of \$14 trillion in housing and stock market wealth?—and the collapse in consumer spending, with the resulting surge in unemployment and decline in mail volume, pose a dire threat to our jobs and the future of the Postal Service. For this reason, we have no time to rest when it comes to political and legislative action.

**Our immediate task is to stabilize Postal Service finances** by rallying support for H.R. 22, a bill to reduce the onerous cost of pre-funding retiree health benefits (*story, page 3*). But we must also be prepared to resist state Do Not Mail registries and calls in Washington for the elimination of Saturday delivery—ideas that have gained significant support, according to opinion polls included in the PRC's universal service report. Both ideas would destroy tens of thousands of jobs and both must be resisted with all our resources. That's why we need every letter carrier to become an e-Activist and to contribute to COLCPE, like the thousands of carriers we honor in this month's magazine.

The road ahead is a daunting one. But we have a progressive new president, a strong and united union, and a powerful political program. These are the essential tools for protecting the Postal Service and our jobs, and for helping to make the promise of the 2008 elections a reality.

So saddle up, brothers and sisters—it's going to be a very challenging year. ☒