

1913-1920

THE NALC VS. THE PMG



After the passage of the Lloyd-LaFollette Act in 1912, letter carriers and the NALC breathed a collective sigh of relief and experienced a brief moment of respite. But this respite was harshly interrupted when the new president, Woodrow Wilson, appointed Albert S. Burleson as postmaster general in March 1913.

Burleson, one of the most anti-union postmaster generals in postal history, immediately declared a new war on postal employees and their unions. His goal was to run the Department at a profit, and he chose to do this at the expense of the postal workforce.

As soon as he took office, Burleson demanded the repeal of all three of the progressive laws passed in 1912. He also vehemently opposed any pay increases for letter carriers and postal clerks in spite of a dramatic rise in the cost of living once World War I began in 1914. By 1916, the dollar was worth half of what it had been in 1907—the year letter carriers had last received a pay increase. Incredibly, when Congress voted a 10 percent pay increase for all federal employees in 1917—a year when the cost of living jumped by 20.3 percent—Burleson succeeded in excluding postal employees from the raise. Furthermore, Burleson opposed all bills designed to establish pensions or annuities for postal employees. He believed that when a worker's job performance declined due to old age, he should be demoted or fired—no matter how many years the worker had labored for the Department. Last, but not least, Burleson refused to recognize or to meet with any representatives from the NALC, and even called for the dissolution of all postal employee unions. In fact, Burleson refused to grant leave without pay to the officers of the postal unions, forcing NALC President Edward Gainor to resign from the Post Office to continue performing his union duties.

In response to such blatant anti-worker and anti-union policies, the NALC shed the habits developed during the gag years and sprang into action. With its gag now removed, the NALC once again took its fight directly to Capitol Hill and once again began to build close relations with congressional committees. Letter carriers desperately needed a pay raise, sick leave benefits, compensation for disability and retirement benefits, and the union began to lobby hard for critical legislation that had been delayed or ignored by the Department and Congress.

The rank and file supported this renewed and vigorous activity. For example, in a letter to *The Postal Record* in 1916, a carrier from Buffalo, New York, urged action on wage legislation:

It took us many long years to obtain our last increase [1907], but then we begged as the supplicant begs. Now we must make a respectful but insistent demand: not for the sop to be thrown at us, but for a living wage that will enable us to have meat at least once a week without having to put our watch in pawn.

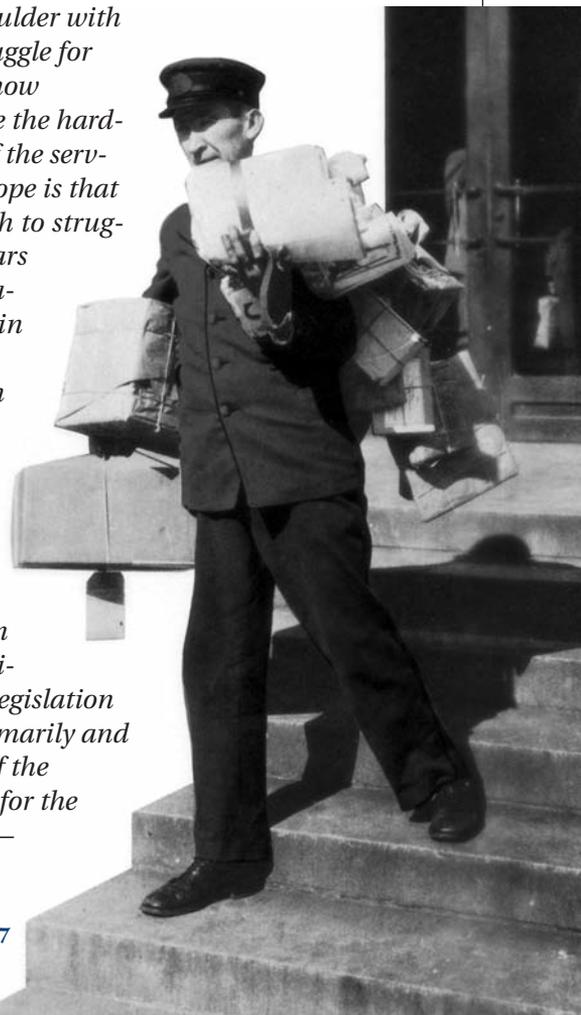
Although no salary bill was passed in 1916, the NALC was successful on two fronts that year. First, when Burleson arbitrarily decided to pay carriers who collected the mail \$200 a year less than those who delivered it, the NALC protested the change to its congressional friends. In response, Congress enacted a bill which made such a salary distinction illegal. Second, on September 7, 1916 the NALC obtained passage of one of the most important laws to affect letter carriers then and now—the first Federal Employees’ Compensation Act. This landmark legislation provided that federal employees suffering work-related injuries would receive compensation for disability and death as well as medical care.

RETIREMENT: LOBBYING, PROTESTS, REBELLION

One of the most interesting by-products of the NALC’s struggle against Burleson was the development of a strong concern with the plight of the older letter carrier.

Since its founding in 1889, the NALC had been lobbying unsuccessfully for some kind of annuity or pension for old carriers, or, as they were then called, “the superannuated carriers.” The issue was so important it remained alive even during the gag years. In 1907 a carrier wrote this eloquent statement to *The Postal Record*:

These old comrades of ours who have stood shoulder-to-shoulder with us for years in our struggle for better conditions are now scarcely able to endure the hardships and exactions of the service ... and their only hope is that they may have strength to struggle along for a few years more until the association [NALC] succeeds in doing something for them. Hundreds are in that condition now and thousands will soon be, and even you, the reader of this, if you are a letter carrier and live long enough, will be in exactly the same condition, for this pension legislation that we seek is not primarily and solely for the benefit of the old men of today; it is for the old men of the future—you and I as well.





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Mrs. Nellie M. McGrath delivering mail during World War I.

Once Burleson became postmaster general in 1913, the NALC devoted more and more energy and resources to the problems of retired and soon-to-be retired carriers. Igniting this activity were Burleson's adamant opposition to any retirement benefits and the Department's callous firing of old carriers who could not keep up with the job's demanding pace. A three-pronged movement emerged. The NALC led the movement by lobbying Capitol Hill unceasingly for retirement legislation. The National Ladies Auxiliary, also long a force in the retirement arena, accelerated its activities. And rank and file carriers engaged in demonstrations and protests throughout the country.

Perhaps the most dramatic of these protests occurred in Fairmont, West Virginia, in 1915. The Fairmont postmaster, complying with Burleson's strict instructions, fired an old letter carrier because he could no longer perform his job satisfactorily. Furious at the postmaster, the remaining 25 employees—letter carriers and postal clerks alike—decided to protest by resigning from their jobs at the same time. All 25 workers were then immediately arrested and thrown in jail for striking against the federal government.

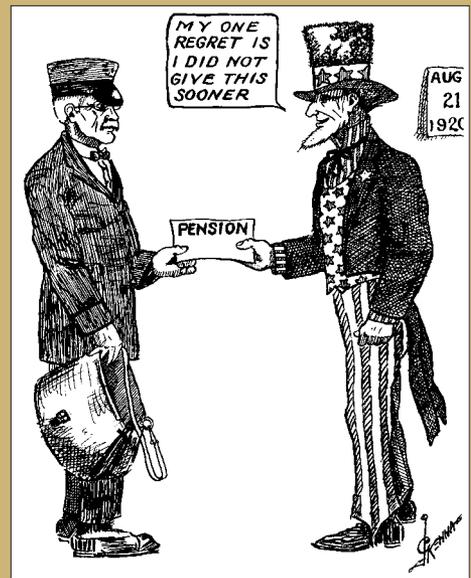
The jailed workers were shocked at the government's reaction. They were not striking—they had simply quit their jobs. But the government persisted in prosecuting the case. Without money to pay for their defense, the carriers and clerks threw themselves on the mercy of the court. In turn, the court imposed fines ranging from \$5 to \$500 upon all but one of the employees—the 25th worker, a letter carrier by the name of W. H. Fisher, had hanged himself in his cell on the night before his trial.

Interestingly, the question of whether mass resignations of federal employees were actually strikes had been discussed at length four years earlier, during the anti-gag hearings in 1911. The American Federation of Labor defended the right of "one man" or a "thousand" men to resign, while the Post Office Department insisted that a mass resignation was an act of coercion and conspiracy against the United States. The issue was still unresolved when the Lloyd-LaFollette Act was passed in 1912. But this did not stop the government in Fairmont three years later. Its response was quick and devastating, a lesson not lost on letter carriers.

AFFILIATION WITH THE AFL

In the midst of the oppressive Burleson years, a major debate was taking place within the NALC: Should the NALC affiliate with the American Federation of Labor?

The debate over affiliation began in the early 1900s. When a committee appointed at NALC's 1903 national convention reported back to dele-



gates two years later, it recommended against affiliation, fearful that the Federation's priorities might begin to take precedence over those of letter carriers. In 1914, when the question was once again raised, many carriers were worried about the strike issue. Unfamiliar with the goals and structure of the AFL, many carriers wrongly believed that the AFL leaders could order a strike, forcing them to defy the no-strike amendment of 1912. Other carriers feared affiliation with the AFL would diminish the NALC's own identity. Still others believed the NALC could take care of itself and need not affiliate with any other organization. And undoubtedly a great number of letter carriers, still bruised and nervous after more than 10 years of the gag, were simply not ready for affiliation with the broader labor movement.

Not surprisingly, then, when a referendum vote on the question was finally tallied in August 1914, 18,769 letter carriers voted against and 3,968 voted for affiliation.

Yet by 1917, when the issue arose again, the tone of the debate was very different. Letter carriers demonstrated more awareness of the strong and important connection between the history of letter carriers and that of the rest of the labor

movement. One carrier used the pages of *The Postal Record* to remind NALC members of the nationwide campaign for an eight-hour day in the late 1880s:

The first 8-hour law for letter carriers was approved May 24, 1888, a year before the NALC was organized. The streets of many a mill town have run red with the blood of wage workers [so] that we [letter carriers] of today might enjoy an 8-hour day.

The 664 delegates to the national convention in Dallas in September 1917 were obviously moved by the same sentiments. When President Gainor recommended that the affiliation issue be submitted to a referendum by the membership, delegate after delegate arose, pleading instead for an immediate vote on the issue. A carrier from New Orleans forcefully expressed the majority's view on affiliation:





I believe the only real relief we can find is by affiliating with other men laboring by the sweat of their brow, men who have united for their own protection and that protection can only be secured through direct and immediate affiliation with the American Federation of Labor.

Moved by these impassioned pleas, the convention suspended its rules and,

by a voice vote, the delegates directed the secretary of the NALC to affiliate immediately with the AFL, which the union did on September 20, 1917.

When the convention's action was tested in a nationwide referendum in early 1918, 92 percent of the NALC membership voted for affiliation—in startling contrast to 83 percent against it in 1914. What accounted for this dramatic turnaround? The question can be answered in three words: Postmaster General Burleson. His savage anti-worker policies convinced carriers in 1917 that they needed the protection and support of the rest of the labor movement.

Buoyed by its affiliation with the AFL, the NALC turned its energies to the legislative front, intent on improving the situation in spite of Burleson. In 1917, a carrier described these activities in amusing terms:

For years we have been howling our heads off for a retirement law. We went to Rochester and hurrahed for a straight pension. We went to San Francisco, waved flags and hurrahed some more, making retirement the paramount issue.... We pestered our Congressmen with letters and telegrams until we became almost a nuisance. Then we had our friends and relatives and fraternal organizations

send letters and telegrams to our Congressmen....

Three years later, the NALC's persistent and prolonged efforts finally bore fruit. On May 22, 1920, the Civil Service Retirement Act became law, and for the first time, letter carriers received retirement benefits. The legislation itself provided for retirement at age 65 with annuities ranging from \$180 to \$720 per year. Carriers also registered impressive legislative gains on June 5, when a bill giving carriers their first sick leave benefits—10 days a year—and a salary bill increasing wages to a scale ranging from \$1,400 to \$1,800 a year were enacted.

For letter carriers and the NALC, 1920 was indeed a time of harvest.

RESISTANCE TO TAYLORISM

At the same time the NALC was voting to affiliate with the AFL and lobbying for progressive legislation for letter carriers, the union was fiercely resisting a new phenomenon in America: the scientific management movement. The NALC was not alone in this struggle, for many trade unions in both the private and public sector were also resisting the encroachment of scientific management into their workplaces.

Scientific management—also called “Taylorism” after its founder, Frederick Winslow Taylor—was an attempt by management to apply the methods of science to the workplace. Its purpose was to completely control all decisions on the job—many of which were then made by the worker—and increase workers' total productivity and efficiency.

The Post Office Department, intrigued with the new movement, began to experiment with Taylorism during Burleson's regime. The Department called its program



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“the efficiency system.” Department officials would single out the youngest, most physically fit carrier and use him as their “average carrier.” The officials would watch the carrier as he worked, measuring with a stopwatch each and every task performed both in the office and on the street. The carrier’s pace, measured in minutes, became the

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standard by which all other carriers were expected to perform. Naturally, few letter carriers could easily maintain the pace, which forced them to speed up their efforts. Some even had to run instead of walking their routes to return to their stations by the required time.

Such standards may seem normal to carriers of today who are expected to case mail according to the “18 & 8” guidelines. But to carriers in the early 1900s, the system was shocking—an aberration. They were not used to such strict control and pressure, and they found it cruel and dehumanizing. Carriers who could not maintain the accelerated pace were often punished with a reduction in wages and some were dismissed. Many carriers even broke down under the mental and physical strain.

The NALC, besieged on all fronts by Burleson, tried to fight against Taylorism by lobbying hard for what was called “anti-

stopwatch” legislation. In 1916, the union backed the Tavenner Bill, which called for outlawing the stopwatch and other time-measuring devices in time-motion studies of any government job. The Tavenner bill, however, was never passed, and the NALC—like other unions—was unsuccessful in its attempts to prevent scientific management from invading the workplace.

Women delivering the mail during World War I.



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