

Retirees and roots



Philip
Dine

Years ago, working on a newspaper story about a union, I needed its membership figure. The union spokesman provided a number that surprised me. I asked whether it included retired members. He paused, then said he wasn't sure whether they counted in the overall membership or even were members at all.

Clearly, retirees were an afterthought—if they were a thought at all.

What a waste, I thought—of talent, knowledge and institutional memory. Unions face enough external obstacles: unfair labor laws and unfair trade practices, recalcitrant employers and journalists who understand little about unions. The last thing they need is self-inflicted damage.

Fortunately, this could not be further from the reality at NALC.

As the wide-ranging cover article in this issue of *The Postal Record* shows, retired letter carriers not only tend to remain NALC members, but often are highly engaged in political work or legislative efforts, in serving as branch officers or with the union's community activities.

From my specific perch here, I learned early on that retirees grasp the importance of getting out the message and are willing to get involved in NALC's communications effort. As a bonus, they bring expertise on postal issues and, often, media savvy.

Your calls, letters and emails have only increased over time. Sometimes you alert us to news reports that merit a response or a correction. Sometimes, you want to write a letter to the editor or get on a radio program, and seek guidance. Sometimes, you've already engaged with the outlet in question and are just informing us.

But always, you demonstrate your commitment to informing the public. I can't overstate your impact on NALC's effort to change the national conversation about postal issues, as we dispel the misleading conventional wisdom and replace it with facts. As noted in this space, retired members recently have provided invaluable suggestions on where we should intervene so that journalists rethink their assumptions or correct their articles.

All of this raises a question: What spurs NALC's retiree involvement? What sets us apart?

I turned to Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, a top program in the field. Ileen DeVault, professor of labor history and academic director of Cornell's Worker Institute, has done extensive research and writing on labor and working-class history over the past 33 years.

Several factors contribute to NALC's status as "a very

unique union in that way," she said. Among them: NALC, both in its culture and *Constitution*, has made clear that it values retirees and their participation. The union's homogeneity—one craft, one employer—leads to shared interests, with all postal issues affecting everyone, including retirees. Letter carriers tend to make this a career, not a short-term job, so the issues matter. And, as federal employees, public and political sentiment affect letter carriers.

She added, "I think the attachment to retirees, and I would argue it goes both ways—retirees to the union and the union to retirees—stems in large part from the fact that the retirees still receive union-negotiated benefits."

Cornell's Lowell Turner, professor of international and comparative labor, cited the nature of the job: "Letter carriers develop a kind of inner strength and pride in the work they do. They think of themselves as letter carriers, identify with the craft—and so most letter carriers belong to the union even though they don't have to. When they retire, a lot of them continue as members. They're public personalities in their daily life; they're out there interacting with the public. I think that enhances their identity of who they are."

Decades ago, Turner carried mail in San Francisco as a member of Golden Gate Branch 214; two weeks into his employment, at age 21, he walked picket lines in the 1970 strike—"that was my introduction to labor issues." He later served as shop steward and chief steward, edited the branch newsletter, took night college courses on the labor activities he engaged in during the day, earned a Ph.D. and has spent three decades at Cornell.

By the way, finishing this column I called Branch 214 to check something, indicated I was writing about active retirees, and was greeted with a cheerful: "I'm one of them!" Turned out to be Sheila Gardner, who delivered mail for 25 years, served as a branch trustee, then sought another way to contribute. Elected secretary treasurer, since January she has held a position she says provides her with a greater "purpose."

To our retirees, whatever your own reasons for engaging in union activities—including helping get out the message—know that your contributions are highly valued. And keep sending your ideas and your tips this way.

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