

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.



Sometimes a small act turns into a big one that changes history. The Great Postal Strike of 1970 brought enormous change, making it the most important event in the modern history of NALC and the Post Office. That's why we celebrate its anniversary every March.

Though it lasted barely more than a week, the strike that began on March 18, 1970, ushered in dramatic change for the union, its sister unions and postal operations, and led to letter carriers finally gaining collective-bargaining rights.

Intolerable conditions

The strike began with a few thousand letter carriers walking off the job in New York City. The causes, though, had persisted 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. Low pay caused high turnover—1 in 4 letter carriers left their jobs each year. Some of those who stayed earned so little that they qualified for welfare benefits.

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.”

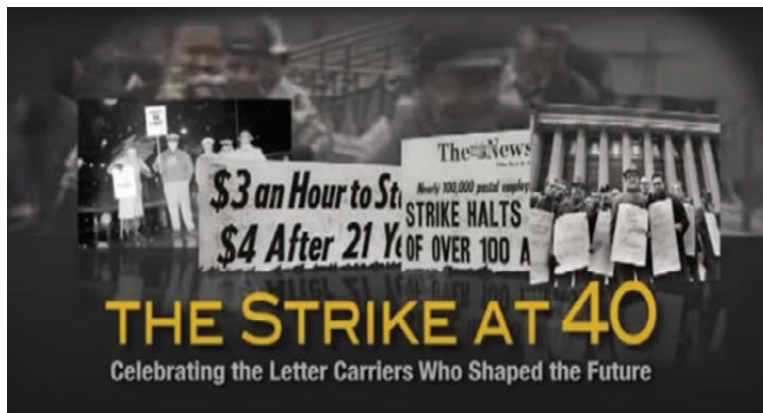
The tension boiled over on March 17, a week after a congressional com-

mittee voted for a pay raise for letter carriers so low that carriers considered it insulting. 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 NALC, New York Branch 36 members that evening voted 1,555 to 1,055 to strike. They acted even though the strike was illegal—they could all be arrested for walking off the job.

At midnight, letter carriers set up picket lines in front of post offices in Manhattan and the Bronx. Members of other postal unions supported the strike by refusing to cross the picket lines to go to work. Soon, NALC branches in other parts of the country began voting to join the strike, potentially making the crisis a national one.

A week after the strike began, the mail was piling up fast. Millions of paychecks, pension checks, bank transfers and other vital mail filled New York's post offices, unsorted and undelivered. In an attempt to break the 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. Letter carriers



returned to work eight days after the strike began, and the landmark event in NALC’s history was over.

Congress responded a few months later by adopting major postal reforms that went beyond a simple pay increase for its workers. It passed legislation 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 at the bargaining table.

History on video

Since 1970, NALC staff and independent scholars have gathered historical information about the strike to preserve the participants’ memories and to better understand its effects. This has included many interviews with strike leaders and participants.

To help preserve the history of the strike and memories of those who lived it, NALC has produced a pair of videos that tell this story from 55 years ago in the voices of those who lived it. Both may be viewed on NALC’s YouTube channel, [youtube.com/ThePostalRecord](https://www.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 trying 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 series based on the strike—the Amazon Prime show “Good Girls Revolt.” 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.

“Letter carriers should always remember how we got to where we are,” NALC President Brian L. Renfroe said. “Our pay, our benefits, our rights and protections—all of these rest on what a few thousand carriers had the courage to do more than a half-century ago. It should inspire us to keep building on what they started.” **PR**