

## History of the NALC

About 60 letter carriers answered the call that went out in 1889 to all city post offices for a meeting to create a national letter carriers' organization. They traveled from 18 states to Milwaukee, Wisconsin in late August of 1889 to preside over the birth of a new union—the National Association of Letter Carriers. By founding their own labor union to fight for a decent living and justice on the job, these early letter carriers were joining fellow American workers in the fledgling labor movement of the late 19th century. Today, the NALC maintains its tradition as a vibrant union of over 300,000 members in all 50 states and other U.S. jurisdictions. However, the trip through the years passed through many obstacles, from governmental indifference to outright hostility. But with persistence by 16 NALC national presidents and the commitment of city carriers throughout the nation, the union grew in strength and numbers. Today it is regarded as one of the leading unions in organized labor, a strong force for workers' causes in Congress, and a dedicated advocate of the rights of rank-and-file members. The call for the Milwaukee meeting set the opening date on August 29, 1889 to coincide with the annual encampment (reunion) of the Grand Army of the Republic, an organization of Union Army veterans, so that many carriers could take advantage of reduced train fares. After a day of discussion and deliberation, a resolution was passed on August 30, 1889 to form the NALC and subsequently William H. Wood of Detroit was elected as the union's first president. The need for a national organization had become apparent in the preceding years as letter carriers fought, and with the assistance of Rep. Samuel "Sunset" Cox, achieved an eight-hour workday in 1888. But that was only the beginning. Letter carriers from many of the large cities, such as New York City and Philadelphia, did not attend the Milwaukee gathering, so it was not until a special conference of big city carriers on July 4, 1890 in New York City that the fledgling union was united. Charles Kelley of New York, chosen to preside at the New York conference, set the tone in a stirring speech: "Give to the National Association your loyal support...and you will have the most powerful instrument for good that the Letter Carriers of the United States ever had at their service." By the time the first NALC convention opened in Boston in August, 1890, there were 52 branches with a membership totaling 4,600 carriers. The NALC was a unified, national organization ready to battle for improved salaries, better working conditions, and greater security for letter carriers and their families. Retaliation by the Post Office Department in some cities was swift. In St. Louis, for example, all leaders of the local branch were summarily dismissed and the branch temporarily disbanded. But the word spread, and by 1892 the NALC boasted 335 branches. The union's first major task was to win implementation of the eight-hour workday which was deliberately being ignored throughout the country. It was not until the NALC won a Supreme Court decision and \$3.5 million overtime award in 1893 that the eight-hour day was truly recognized. In 1895, the first of a series of executive actions designed to stamp out the NALC and other postal organizations was issued when the Postmaster General prohibited postal employees from visiting Washington to influence legislation. President Theodore Roosevelt followed in 1902 with the first of his famous "gag orders," forbidding postal and federal employees, either individually or through associations, to solicit members of Congress for wage increases or for other legislation. Those policies lasted until passage of the Lloyd-LaFollette Act of 1912, which rescinded the gag rule and guaranteed postal and federal workers the right to petition Congress, and recognized their right to join labor organizations. But that law also forbade postal employees from affiliating with any organization that would oblige members to engage in a strike against the United States—an effort by wary congressman to forestall affiliation with the American Federation of Labor which they felt could lead to a strike. Relieved of the gag rule, the NALC set about lobbying for a pay raise, sick leave benefits, compensation for disability and retirement benefits.

Initially, NALC members refused to join the AFL, fearing that it would be unlawful, but by 1917 concerns had eased and on September 20, 1917 the union officially affiliated with the federation. Anti-worker policies pervaded the Post Office Department until 1921, when President Warren G. Harding appointed William H. Hays as Postmaster General, and a new era began with an open-door policy toward unions. Seven days after his appointment, Hays sat down with NALC President Edward J. Gainor and other postal organization leaders for discussions. When Hays resigned a year later, he was accorded the rare honor of being made a full-fledged member for life of the NALC, instead of an "honorary member." He continued as a dues-paying member until his death in 1954. Adequate wages for letter carriers were a continuing problem, except during the Depression, when the average yearly wage of \$2,064 was an enviable amount. The situation was aggravated, however, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 cut carriers' pay by 15 percent, and tacked on a nine-day furlough. It wasn't until 1935, after constant lobbying by the NALC, that wages were restored. Meanwhile, a power struggle was brewing within the ranks of the NALC during the late 1930s, with unrest over the leader-

ship of Gainor, who had led the union since 1914. It ended in September, 1941 at the Los Angeles convention with the election of William C. Doherty as president. Edward Gainor had led the NALC for 27 years and through many turbulent and difficult times. President Doherty's plans for an immediate push for a new pay raise were quickly dashed with the outbreak of World War II, and carriers were asked to perform extra wartime tasks such as distributing over 120 million ration books. A nationwide appeal succeeded in garnering the carriers a \$300-a-year wartime bonus, and when the war ended, more increases followed. On October 19, 1949, the NALC finally achieved one of its longstanding objectives—equalization of wages for all letter carriers. This meant city delivery carriers began receiving the same wages regardless of the size of the community in which they worked. A year later, letter carriers were dealt a setback, however, when Postmaster General Jesse Donaldson, a former carrier himself, reduced residential deliveries to once a day, ending the traditional twice-a-day deliveries that gave customers better service and letter carriers a break in their on-the-street workday. Tough times for letter carriers continued under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, elected in November, 1952, who, despite his general popularity, proved no friend of letter carriers as he repeatedly vetoed pay raises and allowed the Post Office Department to operate under a "daddy knows best" attitude during his administration. Undeterred, NALC's Doherty and Jerome Keating, who would later become NALC president, launched a dynamic "Crusade for Economic Equality" campaign in 1960, which led Congress to pass another pay bill. When Eisenhower vetoed it, Congress on July 1, 1960, overrode the veto. It was one of only two of the 169 Eisenhower vetoes overridden in his eight years as president. The presidency of John F. Kennedy gave new dimension to the NALC and other federal and postal unions when Kennedy signed Executive Order 10988 giving federal and postal unions exclusive national recognition. On July 1, 1962, the NALC was granted the exclusive right to represent all city delivery carriers in dealing with postal management, and under new NAM President Keating, the first National Postal Agreement was signed five months later. But morale plummeted during the mid-1960s as inflation eroded carriers' salaries. A growing sense of militancy developed as carriers and their families in big cities neared the poverty level. In New York City's Branch 36, a storm of protest erupted when President Richard Nixon provided only a 4.1 percent pay raise in 1969, far below what was needed. Events escalated as the Christmas mail rush neared and Nixon called NALC President James Rademacher to the White House to forge a compromise that tied a pay raise in 1970 to the concept of an independent postal authority to bargain with postal unions. The Nixon-Rademacher agreement incensed letter carriers and when a House committee the following March approved a bill reflecting the Nixon-Rademacher compromise, calls for a strike were shouted in New York's Branch 36 and other branches. On March 17, 1970, the votes were counted in Branch 36, and a long-threatened strike was approved, 1,555-1,055. At 12:01 a.m. March 18, picket lines by Branch 36 went up at post offices throughout Manhattan and the Bronx in New York City. Letter carriers were on strike. Within two days, over 200,000 letter carriers and other postal employees across the country had joined the walkout. Nixon called out 25,000 soldiers to move the mail in New York City. The strike ended after eight days when local NALC leaders assured strikers that an agreement had been reached, even though their word was premature. Round-the-clock negotiations began and on April 2 a satisfactory agreement was reached, which was quickly approved by Congress. The militancy that came out of New York's Branch 36 changed forever the nature of the NALC. In 1971, a nationwide rank and-file movement led by Vincent R. Sombrotto of Branch 36 was formed with goals of giving members the right to vote directly for national union officers and ending a proxy system that had prevented non-incumbents from breaking into the union's power structure. Sombrotto was elected national president in 1978, ousting incumbent President J. Joseph Vacca. He moved quickly to enhance the union's lobbying power with Congress and the Executive Branch, as well as the NALC's stature within the trade union movement. In 1989, the NALC culminated a yearlong observance of its Centennial with a gala celebration in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the birthplace of the union. Today, the union has developed a medical health plan considered among the best available for federal and postal employees. It also maintains a high quality life insurance program for all its members, and operates a special retirement community in Florida called Nalcrest. In 1999, the union was successful in achieving—through contract arbitration—an unprecedented upgrade in pay for all city letter carriers in recognition of the harder work they perform in the Postal Service's automated environment. Most importantly, the NALC today continues to press its fight in both the workplace and the halls of Congress to enhance the competitiveness of the U. S. Postal Service and to improve the economic and social well-being of the nation's city delivery letter carriers.