

March 18, 1970

The Day the Mail Stopped

By Paul Daniels

The wildcat Postal strike that began on March 18, 1970 signaled the end of collective begging and the beginning of collective bargaining that raised hundreds of thousands of postal workers, craft and management, from poverty level wages to middle class wage earners. Letter carriers today, active and retired, are the direct beneficiaries of that momentous event and as the 44th anniversary of that strike

approaches you should take a moment to reflect and give thanks to the brothers and sisters, led by Vincent R. Sombrotto, who participated in a strike that had such a dramatic effect on the quality of life for letter carriers and their families.

On that faithful day in March NALC Branch 36 NY, Branch 41 Brooklyn, Long Island Branch 6000 as well as branches in New Jersey, supported by APWU postal clerks, staged an illegal work stoppage. At its peak over 200,000 letter carriers went on strike that included letter carriers from throughout the country including Boston Branch 34, Minneapolis Branch 9 and San Francisco Branch 214.

In solidarity with their brothers and sisters throughout the country a number of CT Branches also joined the walkout. While there are only 11 local Branches in CT today in 1970 there were over 50 local branches in CT. Branches in CT that participated in the strike and for which a Temporary Restraining Order and Notice of Hearing on Motion for Preliminary Injunction was issued on March 20, 1970 were: Stamford Br. 60, Hartford Br. 86, New Haven Br. 19, Norwalk Br. 147, Waterbury Br. 168, Middletown Br. 175, Torrington Br. 225, Meriden Br. 227, Milford Br. 1327, Branford Br. 1538, Windsor Br. 2424, Westport Br. 2682, Darien Br. 3093, New Milford Br. 3118, Cos Cob Br. 3526 and Orange Br. 6131.

The members of each NALC Branch that made the decision to engage in the illegal strike against the United States Government, since the USPS was a government agency at that time, reached a final decision with great trepidation following a serious and difficult debate between senior and junior union members.

In Br. 227 Meriden, which at the time had approximately

85 members, the debate went on over the course of two nights of special meetings with senior carriers expressing serious concerns over joining the illegal strike since no one knew how much jeopardy it would put their civil service pensions in should they be arrested for going on strike. Br. 227 President Robert McAllister along with Vice President Dan McBride banged the gavel repeatedly and loudly over the course of the meeting in a futile attempt to maintain order. (That nicked and indented gavel, handmade and presented to the branch by letter carrier George H. Rudolph in 1912 is proudly displayed in CT Merged Branch 20's union office.)

The meeting was being held at the Knights Hall on Willow Street and beer was flowing

freely for most of the four or five hour meeting and as you would suspect tempers flared from time to time as the night wore on. At one point in the meeting carrier Chet Orrill came charging into the meeting hall from a side room that contained a phone booth (there were no cell phones at that time) crashing into brother Al Lapuc whose beer in hand went splashing over a number of carriers. When the hub bub died down carrier Orrill excitedly announced that he had just spoken to Postmaster Joe Ferrigno who told him he expected all letter carriers to report to work the following day. As you might expect that announcement was greeted with jeering from the younger carriers.



When the first strike vote was taken that night it failed to pass. But a small group of younger carriers, me included, were determined to pass a strike vote and continued the conversation until almost midnight. After a number of other votes to strike failed to pass people were becoming weary and wanted to go home. One last attempt was made with a motion to go on strike only if Hartford Branch 86 voted to go on strike and for whatever reason that motion passed. Within minutes of passing a motion to adjourn it was announced over the radio (there were no I-Pads at that time) that Hartford Branch 86 had just voted to go on strike at midnight March 20, 1970. President McBride immediately announced that NALC Branch 227 Meriden was now, in accordance with the motion passed, also on strike effective midnight.

In the early morning hours of March 20, 1970 Brothers Robert McAllister, Dan McBride, Anthony Florczyk and Steven Dynder began to picket the Meriden Post Office.

Although the final strike vote was far from unanimous not one single carrier reported for work on March 20th.

That spoke volumes to the caliber and character of that generation of letter carriers. And much to their honor and credit the APWU clerks led by their president

Richard Ritchie refused to cross the picket line. At that time Letter Carriers and Postal Clerks understood clearly the value and importance of a Union. We were 100% Union; there were no scabs that crossed the Union picket line.

Headlines in the Meriden-Record Journal newspaper for March 20th through March 24th read, "Meriden Carriers Join Strike Parade", "City Mail Service Comes To Halt", "Postal Strike Keeps Escalating", "Entire City Tied Up Tight", "Judge Tells Postmen to Return" and "Postmen Back On Job At Meriden Post Office". For two days Meriden Letter Carriers took turns picketing the Meriden Post Office while Postal Inspectors and the local sheriff hunted for President McAllister, who we had hidden out in a motel in Middlefield, CT, to serve the Temporary Restraining order issued by a judge on March 20th.

There was no vote to return to work. When the sheriff finally caught up with President McAllister and served the Restraining Order McAllister advised the membership that we had made our point and we should return to work on Monday March 23th which we all did with heads held high.

Letter Carrier's pay in 1970 was \$4.05 per hour at the top rate of pay reached after 21 years of service with a

beginning salary of \$2.97 per hour. Letter carriers who went on strike in Meriden lost two day's pay each that amounted to between \$47.52 and \$64.80 for the two day's pay depending on years in service. While that was a considerable sum of money to letter carriers at that time not a single carrier complained and not a single carrier missed their monthly union dues payment.

In 1970 Congress and the President determined what the wages of Postal workers would be. There was no collective bargaining at that time and for many years prior to 1970 Postal workers were kept among the lowest paid of all government employees. One of the straws that broke the camel's back and led to the strike was the President and Congress offering a meager and insulting 4% pay raise to Postal employees for a raise that was long overdue while at the same time passing a Presidential pay increase of 100%, a Vice-Presidential pay increase of 44% and a Congressional pay increase of 41%.

"We were 100% Union; there were no scabs that crossed the union picket line."

James Reston in an article published on March 26, 1970 captured the essence of the wildcat Postal strike. In part he wrote, "The striking mailmen have delivered at least one message to the American people, and the Washington politicians. They have said loud and clear that institutions which ignore legitimate grievances, even if they are clothed in the majesty of the Government, will be challenged and even defied." "The President and the Congress did not recognize the legitimate grievances of the mailmen in time. They trifled with them, and played politics with them." "The mailmen, wrong as they are, have made the point clear. They are insisting that governments must be responsive to the legitimate grievances of the people if they are to be respected and obeyed."

Whenever I think of the money I earned to support my family and the ability to send my children to college, the vacation time I was able to enjoy, the sick leave I was able to earn and use, the health insurance that protected my family and now the pension I collect I thank the NALC, Vincent R. Sombrotto and all the courageous Letter Carriers who followed him and participated in the wildcat Postal Strike of 1970. ☑