



Neal Boenzi, *The New York Times*

1970 A STRIKE IS CALLED

Not surprisingly, New York was the center of the drama, for the city itself had been a cauldron of social unrest, with protests against the Vietnam War, urban race riots, strikes by teachers, transportation and sanitation workers dominating the news for several years. Angry Branch 36 members had already raised their voices protesting the federal government's indifference to their plight and their own union's ambivalence, and they became enraged in early February 1970, when Nixon deferred a wage increase scheduled for July 1.

But the spark that lit the fuse was the news that on March 12, a House committee approved a bill reflecting the Nixon-Rademacher compromise. At the regular branch meeting that same day, Branch 36 President Gustave Johnson was interrupted as he delivered a report about the Nixon-Rademacher bill. Although the branch's executive board had earlier directed stewards to tell carriers to oppose calling for a strike, angry carriers exploded with shouts of "No, no! Not enough! Strike! Enough talk! Strike!" and demanded a strike vote. Raucous debate verging on a brawl ended with an agreement to meet again the next Tuesday, March 17, and hold a strike vote at that time.

But with Branch 36's leaders, supported by Rademacher, dead set against a strike and fearful that a meeting might work to the benefit of the more militant members of the branch, the officers arranged only for the vote. With members' credentials challenged in an effort to discourage voting and creating long lines at the voting machines, the vote on March 17, 1970 at the Manhattan Center dragged on until around 10:30 p.m. Some 30 minutes later, the results were announced to the members: 1,555—yes; 1,055—no. NALC's largest local had chosen by a 3-to-2 margin to strike against the U.S. Government regardless of whether the national union joined the strike.

Johnson told the cheering members, “There will be no mail delivery tomorrow in New York,” adding, “Your voice has been heard tonight.” The leader of New York Metro Area Postal Workers, the union representing the inside workers in the post office, said his members would honor carriers’ picket lines even though they could not vote whether to strike until the union’s next regular meeting in three weeks. But Brooklyn Branch 41’s president immediately announced that his carriers would join the strike. Letter carriers had taken a stand. The long-threatened strike was on.

Since Branch 36 had night routers, the strike began throughout Manhattan and the Bronx earlier than elsewhere in the New York area. At 12:01 a.m., March 18, members of Branch 36 set up picket lines outside post offices and, although not all the members had voted, almost every letter carrier in Branch 36 stayed out. Immediately, over 25,000 postal clerks and drivers—members of the giant Manhattan-Bronx Postal Union—honored the picket lines. And later in the morning, when carriers in Brooklyn and in many parts of Long Island, northern New Jersey and nearby Connecticut should have reported to work, many of their branches joined the strike.

And then the wildfire swept the nation: Branch 34, Boston, Massachusetts; Branch 157, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Branch 1, Detroit, Michigan; Branch 40, Cleveland, Ohio; Branch 84, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Branch 214, San Francisco, California; Branch 9, Minneapolis and



Postal strikers at the 369th Regimental Armory in New York City refusing to return to work.

Jack Manning, The New York Times

Bill Braginetz said it best—in fact, said it so well that today, years later, I remember it word for word: “For the first time, I finally feel like a human being,” he told me with tears in his eyes on the afternoon of March 18, 1970, as we walked up and down East 45th Street in front of the Grand Central Station post office in Manhattan where we had worked together for more than two decades—Bill, always the perfect carrier, on time all the time, and me, always the cut up and far from perfect.

Shortly before midnight, I walked across Manhattan toward Grand Central Station post office on the East Side with two other Grand Central carriers—Eddie Morris and Charlie Sprinkle. Eddie and Charlie had grabbed sheets of oak tag from my truck for picket signs, and we carried some wooden barriers, used earlier that day for the St. Patrick’s Day parade, over to East 45th Street outside the post office. At midnight, about a hundred night letter carrier routers and all the clerks and other postal employees poured out of the building to join us, and every carrier and clerk just then coming to work honored the line.

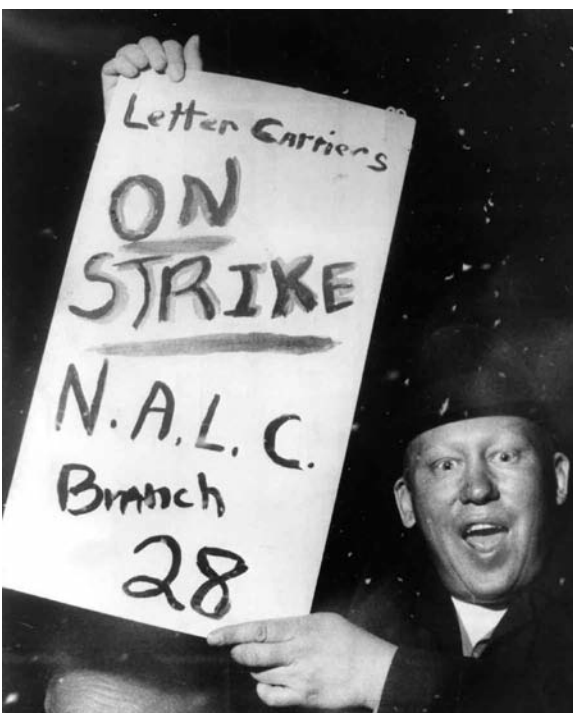
Personal recollections of Vincent R. Sombrotto, Branch 36, New York, NY



Pickets on duty at the Dearborn, Michigan Post Office. Ira Rosenberg, Detroit Free Press

First day on a new job: A soldier from Fort Dix, NJ sorts mail at the Brooklyn General Post Office. Barton Silverman, The New York Times





Minneapolis Tribune

Branch 28, St. Paul, Minnesota; Branch 47, Denver, Colorado; Branch 11, Chicago, Illinois. In large and small communities alike, from coast to coast, letter carriers and postal clerks walked off their jobs, joined the picket line, and dug in for the duration. By March 23 the strikers numbered over 200,000 strong.

VICTORY!

Almost immediately after Branch 36 set up picket lines on March 18, the Nixon administration began maneuvering to crack the workers' revolt. Government lawyers in New York obtained an injunction ordering a return to work. But Branch 36's strikers defied the order. As the walk-out spread, more court orders were issued, and local NALC leaders found themselves in the nearly unprecedented and certainly uncomfortable position of seeking legal aid and, in some cases, dodging federal process servers.

As the strike reached across the country, NALC President James Rademacher was caught between his loyalty to his members and his concern for the union's future. The incendiary rhetoric he had employed in New York the previous year when, in the aftermath of the two job actions in the Bronx, he had vowed to lead a strike if



United Press International



The troops arrive in New York City.

United Press International

Striking letter carriers
in Paterson, New Jersey.
United Press International



pay legislation was not enacted within a few weeks, may have helped fuel the flames of revolt. Rademacher understood all the reasons why his members walked off their jobs to fight. Yet he feared

that if he assumed leadership of the wildcat strike, making it official, the government would totally crush the union—bankrupt it with fines, padlock its offices, strip away its jurisdiction, jail its officers and fire its members. Rademacher later would acknowledge that there are times when workers have no choice but to strike—he simply felt that the morning of March 18 was not such a time.

Trying to escape his dilemma and end the crisis, Rademacher first attempted to persuade the strikers to return to work. After being assured by the Nixon administration that negotiations would begin once the strike ended and only then, the NALC president carried this message to an emergency meeting of the presidents of the union's 300 largest branches on March 20 in Washington, DC. He personally urged the presidents to call their members back to work so he could pursue

negotiations, and in a spirited, noisy session, hundreds of local leaders accepted the idea with this proviso: If agreement were not reached in five days, NALC would stage a nationwide work stoppage.

The next day, Saturday, March 21, Rademacher sent a telegram to all 6,500 NALC branches outlining the plan—return to work Monday and allow five days for negotiations before taking nationwide action. But the back-to-work appeal had virtually no impact on the picket lines, because for many of the strikers, the wildcat was aimed as much at the union's failures as it was at the government's. At a meeting of Branch 36 the same day, the members voted almost unanimously to stay off the job, and across the country other branches voted to walk out or stay out.

His efforts at persuasion having failed, Rademacher turned on the strikers: At a press conference Sunday, March 22, he charged that the New York City walkout had been instigated partly by “subversive” elements—members of the left-wing Students for a Democratic Society. Rademacher also threatened Branch 36's leaders with expulsion from the NALC, and sent national officers out to the field to quash support for the strike.

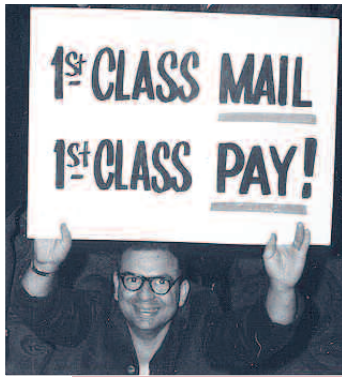
But on the picket lines, most striking carriers and clerks were not listening to the administration's promises nor those of Rademacher, for despite the pleas from the national union, fewer than 60 of some 200 branches out on strike returned to work. President Nixon, with business interests clamoring for action and the effects of the strike rolling across the country, went on the offensive on March 23 in an effort to end the crisis. On nationwide television, Nixon took his case to the American people and declared a national emergency. He also ordered 25,000 soldiers into New York City to move the mail. Not since Grover Cleveland became the first president to order troops to break a strike by calling infantry, cavalry and artillery units to end the 1894 Pullman railroad strike in Chicago had a president resorted to such a desperate and ill-conceived move. The troops were ineffective: They never moved much mail, as shipments had been embargoed across the country and the military units had none of the skills craft work-

ers possessed. Still, Nixon's use of soldiers as scabs, his implied threat to send troops to other cities, the mounting legal pressure and threatened fines, criticism of the wildcat action by AFL-CIO President George Meany plus Rademacher's appeals and claims of progress, together convinced many postal workers to return to work. But not the strikers in New York City.

It was only when the officers of Branch 36, relaying information provided by the union's national leadership, assured the striking letter carriers that an agreement had been reached with the administration that seemed to meet nearly every demand did the carriers and clerks in New York City put down their picket signs and return to work. But no such agreement existed, for what became known as the "phantom package" was simply NALC's proposal—a retroactive 12 percent pay increase, fully paid health benefits, an eight-year pay scale, collective bargaining with binding arbitration, and full amnesty for the strikers. Whether this was a deliberate deception, as many

The mail began to pile up as letter carriers and postal clerks went out on strike in Chicago.
AP Wide World Photos





The years of what some deemed “collective begging” were over.

believed at the time, or a misunderstanding, the effect was an end to the strike. The New York carriers never formally voted to return to work, but the eight-day revolt was over. First to go out and last to go back, New York City’s letter carriers had shown a resolve and courage that would not be forgotten.

As soon as the New York strikers returned to their jobs, Rademacher and other postal union leaders, assisted by the AFL-CIO, began round-the-clock negotiations with the Post Office Department. By April 2, the parties reached an agreement they believed would satisfy the demands of the carriers and clerks who, at great personal risk, had defied both the federal government and their national leaders.

The “Memorandum of Agreement” expressed the postal unions’ and the Department’s accord in four basic areas: pay increases totaling 14 percent—6 percent retroactive to December 27, 1969, and another 8 percent effective whenever a postal reform bill was enacted; support for the establishment of an independent postal authority; collective bargaining over wages, hours and working conditions with unresolved issues to be settled through final and binding arbitration; and “compression” of the time required for postal workers to reach the top step of their grade level from 21 years to eight.

Congress quickly approved the 6 percent retroactive pay increase, and this became law on April 15. Obtaining congressional approval of the remaining elements of the Memorandum of Agreement proved more difficult, and it was not until

August 12, 1970, that the Postal Reorganization Act became law. Letter carriers and other postal workers had, at long last, achieved full collective bargaining with their employer. Rademacher himself would be partly vindicated, for as the decades ahead proved, the postal reform legislation he had supported brought collective bargaining to postal employees, freeing them from “collective begging”—the total dependence on the good wishes and wisdom of their elected representatives.

Still, only with the strike could carriers have achieved substantial economic and legislative gains. The long struggle of letter carriers for dignity and justice had taken a great step forward. The strike—what news magazines at the time termed the “Revolt of the Good Guys”—was an uncoordinated, spontaneous uprising of aggrieved workers, longing not only for economic justice but also for a voice and a recognition of their dignity and humanity.

For many letter carriers, it was also a protest against local and national leaders whose concern for their members was outweighed by their understandable fear of what an all-powerful federal government could do to their union and their own liberty. As a result, they vacillated while the anger and resentment of carriers in New York and elsewhere in the country grew. In the end, the strikers changed the Postal Service and their union. And yet the struggle for dignity and justice would continue in the years ahead—on different battlefields and with different weapons.