

Great Postal Strike - (1970)



On the afternoon of March 23, 1970, President Richard Nixon addressed the American public on television. He announced that he had, “just now, directed the activation of the men of the various military organizations to begin in NYC the restoration of essential mail services.” The president took this extraordinary step as a reaction to an ongoing wild-cat strike among U.S. postal workers. At the core of the strikers’ complaints were recent Congressional actions that gave a 41% pay raise to Members of Congress while postal employees would receive a 4% raise. Letter carriers and other postal workers were at the low end of the national wage scale. The situation was so dire that some carriers in New York City were eligible for welfare programs.

The strike began just after midnight on March 18, 1970, as members of the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) local #36 voted 1,555 to 1,055 to walk out the next morning. Even as NALC president James Rademacher urged his membership to return to work, the wild-cat strike spread across the nation. By the time President Nixon appeared on television to announce his decision to call up the reserves to help move mail in New York City, the strike had spread to 100 US cities, and involved over 200,000 postal workers.

As workers marched in picket lines in front of post offices from New York to Los Angeles, Americans who might have taken their mail for granted in previous weeks were anxiously seeking a resolution to the strike. At a time before cell phones and the internet, when fax machines were brand new and few in number, mail carriers toiled the nation’s commerce and information in their bags. Letters, bills and checks to pay those bills, birthday cards, passports,

legal documents, and even draft notices piled up in mail sacks on post office floors across the nation.

The strike came to an end a little over a week after it began. Postal workers eventually secured a larger pay increase. The troubles that had led to the 1970 strike were not unique to postal workers. By the late 1960s it had become evident that the centuries old institution of the Post Office Department was crumbling under the strain of post World War II mail volumes. The solution to many of these problems at that time was the reorganization of the Department on July 1, 1971 into the U.S. Postal Service. But that is another story for another blog and another time.

On Saturday, March 20th, you can learn more about the strike from those who were there. Vincent R. Sombrotto (president emeritus of the National Association of Letter Carriers and member of Local 36), William Burrus (president of the American Postal Workers Union), and George Gould (former Staff Director of the Subcommittee on Postal Operations and Services) discuss these momentous events and the dramatic changes the strike sparked in the nation's mail service and its employees' lives.

You can watch live online or catch the recorded program at your convenience.

- Watch live on Saturday, March 20th at 1-3 p.m. Eastern Time:

www.postalmuseum.si.edu/programs

- Watch the recorded program: www.youtube.com/SmithsonianNPM