

## Viewpoint: Fellow Letter Carriers, Stand Together and Vote No on Sellout Contract!

*By Rob Darakjian, letter carrier in NALC Branch 2902 and member of Build a Fighting NALC*

City letter carriers finally got to see the headlines of the tentative agreement Letter Carriers (NALC) President Brian Renfroe has negotiated—after more than 500 days of working without a contract and being kept completely in the dark about the state of bargaining.

In that time, a groundswell of [enthusiasm](#) and [organizing](#) for “Open Bargaining”—the right to be informed about the real state of negotiations—has swept through the union and became the [Build a Fighting NALC](#) movement. More than 40 union branches and a few state associations passed resolutions calling for this democratic right.

In August at the national convention, we won passage of an open bargaining resolution—but only after much ballyhoo from union leaders about how transparency could only hurt negotiations. In their view, letter carriers should just sit back and wait for the “historic” contract that was about to be delivered to us from on high.

Now we see the results of their approach to bargaining. Renfroe has lied about many things, but with this contract he may have inadvertently told the truth for once. This is a historic contract—a historically *bad* contract.

### A MASSIVE PAY CUT

The three-year deal would provide 1.3 percent yearly wage increases, two of which would be retroactive. Three steps at the beginning of the pay scale would be eliminated, compressing the time it takes to reach top pay by a few years while denying immediate pay raises to most steps on the pay table. Back pay is to be paid whenever the postal service deems “as soon as practicable.”

Health insurance premiums will go up for letter carriers. Time allotted to organize mail in the mornings, known as “fixed office time,” is reduced by 13 minutes, from 33 to 20. Management has always had an incentive to reduce time spent in the office, because it means more time spent delivering mail on the street. By committing to reducing office

time, this tentative agreement sets the stage for speedup, which could translate into the loss of thousands of routes or jobs.

Full cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs) are preserved with the existing formula for those at top pay, while everyone else continues to get the “diet” variety.

It’s a good thing we have retained our COLAs. But already, the formula for how much we receive is not equal to the rate of inflation as calculated by the Consumer Price Index (CPI-W) every six months, which would be a 100 percent COLA. Instead, the dollar amount of COLA is first determined at the top pay step. For every 0.4 percent increase of inflation, top step carriers get a 1 penny increase in their hourly wage. Every pay step except the top step gets only a percentage *of this percentage*, so those at the bottom end of the pay scale get a substantially smaller COLA. Contrary to what Renfroe and his supporters claim, this “diet” COLA does not fully protect us against inflation.

Pay is the most pressing issue for letter carriers. Inflation has eaten into our wages and made the job less attractive to new hires, exacerbating the staffing crisis throughout the Postal Service.

The only letter carriers who would get substantial wage increases right away would be the city carrier assistants (CCAs, the bottom tier), part-time flexibles (PTFs, a middle tier), and career carriers who are on the first three pay steps, AA, A, and B. Everyone else would get only the diet COLA and the three 1.3 percent increases over the life of the contract—except those already at top pay, who get an additional \$1,000 dollars per year.

The overtime rules would be changed to allow letter carriers to *surrender* their absolute right to refuse work over 12 hours a day or 60 days in a week. If we can’t get a real raise, “let them eat overtime”! At the same time, “peak season”—the period leading up to Christmas during which letter carriers are only paid time a half, never double time, even if we work over 10 hours—is extended from four weeks to six.

Contrary to many members’ hopes, all the wage tiers introduced in the 2010s would be kept in place, deepening the wedge that cuts into our solidarity. CCAs, who make up the bulk of new hires, will receive... wait for it... an increase of 50 whole cents, to bring their starting pay up to just past \$20 an hour.

Before the CCA classification was created, we had Transitional Employees (TEs), who were already making \$20-an-hour starting pay back in 2011. Build a Fighting NALC calls for a \$30-an-hour starting wage, which, adjusted for inflation, would return the purchasing power of starting pay back to where it was then.

Both tables 1 and 2 remain for career carriers. Usually a letter carrier is hired first as a CCA or PTF for up to two years, then “converted” to career status. Letter carriers converted after 2013 are converted to the table 2 pay schedule, which is much lower than the old table 1. Under the current contract, a new career carrier on table 2 starts at \$22.13 an hour, compared to \$29.85 on table 1.

## **WE CAN DO BETTER**

However Renfroe and his cronies try to spin it, this contract boils down to a massive pay cut for city letter carriers.

Since February 2020, prices on goods and services are up more than 21 percent. Since 2013, postal workers have seen our wages increase 18 percent, while inflation increased 31 percent, translating to a net loss in purchasing power of 13 percent. We have experienced the [lowest wage increases](#), relative to inflation, *of any profession* tracked by the Bureau of Labor Statistics!

We’ve been losing ground for 10 years, and now our national union president wants us to put it in black and white and wave a victory banner? Build a Fighting NALC says vote no! Our national leadership has failed us. We must organize a national vote-no campaign that can bring together letter carriers, station by station, and serve as a launch pad for a long overdue national contract campaign—even if we have to bring the union leadership along kicking and screaming.

This offer isn’t just bad; it’s *insulting*. All around us, we see other groups of organized workers taking big strides forward. Two weeks ago, dockworkers secured a 62 percent

wage increase. Boeing workers just got an offer of a 35 percent wage increase. In their most recent contract negotiations, the Teamsters won a \$2.75-an-hour increase across the board for drivers, and the United Auto Workers won a 25 percent wage increase and the elimination of wage tiers.

In all these unions, workers mobilized in contract campaign events like pickets, mass meetings, and media appearances geared towards the public. Three of them also went on strike. Build a Fighting NALC believes the right to strike is a fundamental democratic right. Along with open bargaining, it will be necessary to win the long-term fight to maintain a high-quality public postal service.

## **COMING TOGETHER TO VOTE NO**

Right now we're focused on doing everything in our power to organize a vote no campaign, along with the Concerned Letter Carriers, reform-minded union officers like Mike Caref, and letter carriers across the country. As bad as this tentative agreement is, we can't assume that everyone else is voting no—union leaders are preparing their talking points to try and convince letter carriers that this is really the best we can get, and the best we deserve. We are planning interventions at all the regional rap sessions where the leadership will be arguing for a yes vote.

The key task right now is to get letter carriers together at every level to discuss this tentative agreement. Isolation breeds despair. We can't simply vote no as individuals; we need to organize vote-no standups, pass local resolutions recommending a no vote, and organize vote-no meetings before work in the parking lot. In every station, everyone who commits to voting no should take a picture with a sign and share it on social media.

We can cut through despair by building solidarity on the workroom floor, addressing the legitimate concerns and questions our co-workers have about the tentative agreement, and pledging to vote no together and for each other. Many of our union sisters and brothers are wondering whether this, in fact, might be the best we can get, and looking

for someone who can help point the way forward. Be that person in your station, and in your local membership meeting.

Our national Zoom call this Sunday, October 27, at 10 a.m. Pacific will kick off the Vote No campaign. [Register here](#) and join the fight!

*Rob Darakjian is a letter carrier in NALC Branch 2902 and a member of Build a Fighting NALC. Check out the group's new website [www.fightingnalc.com](http://www.fightingnalc.com) for more information and Vote No campaign materials. Email questions, photos, and reports to [buildafightingnalc@gmail.com](mailto:buildafightingnalc@gmail.com).*