

NRLCA President Stutts' State of the Union Address

It may be a new year and a new presidential administration, but the challenges facing our country and our labor union are no less daunting. Although there is reason to be optimistic that the coronavirus will be under control within the year, we are enduring new surges and new strains while we await a more widespread vaccine distribution and a return to some semblance of normalcy. And while the NRLCA is working hard to address the pandemic's effect on rural carriers' safety, health, and workloads, at the same time we are preparing for contract negotiations for a new National Agreement and continuing to carry out the rest of the union's work. The pandemic has, in so many ways, forced us to do our work differently and get creative, but just as you are still delivering the mail to your customers, the National Board and union representatives have not let this crisis slow them down.

I'd like to update you, more specifically, on what we have been working on recently:

National Level Step 4: Pandemic-Related Unusual Conditions

It doesn't take a genius to see that the coronavirus has led to a tremendous increase in parcels, which has affected rural carriers' workloads and work hours. That is why, on June 18, 2020, after the Postal Service rebuffed our proposed MOU to get immediate assistance to rural letter carriers who have seen an unprecedented increase in parcels as a result of the pandemic, I filed a [National-Level Grievance](#) under Article 15.4 of the National Agreement. Citing rarely invoked contractual provisions that address unusual circumstances and longstanding changes in route conditions, we are demanding overtime payments for rural carriers since February 29, 2020. This amounts to over \$1 million per pay period.

Since filing the grievance, we have had frequent discussions and regular meetings with the Postal Service about the issues raised in the grievance, including two meetings in November and multiple conversations with top Postal Service labor relations representatives in December. In addition, we have been compiling significant data that increasingly supports our position regarding the significant increase in parcels, need for assistance, and demand for additional compensation.

The Postal Service has yet to agree to our demands or to issue a denial on the grievance, but we expect to receive a decision soon. If it issues a denial, we will not back down. Rather, we shall immediately appeal the case to arbitration and, due to the significance of this matter and its ongoing nature, will seek expedited arbitration to put the case ahead of others in the queue (as you know, the National Agreement requires cases to be heard in the order in which the grievances arise). You can expect an update from me in the coming weeks.

Contract Negotiations

Our National Agreement expires on May 20, 2021. The National Board and our counsel have already started preparing for negotiations which will begin the first week of March. In addition to gathering information and discussing proposals internally, we have been speaking with a team of consultants and experts who will help us make the case to achieve significant improvements in the contract and, if necessary, support our arguments in interest arbitration. Remember, the bargaining cycle never ends. As soon as we negotiate one National Agreement, we begin preparing for the next round of bargaining.

We have also been following closely what has happened with other Postal Service union contracts. NALC reached a tentative agreement in November 2020. It is a 44-month contract with wage increases from 1.1%-1.3%. APWU's contract expires later this year, and NPMHU's contract expires in 2022.

Conferences, Conventions, and Elections

Early last year, the National Board made the difficult decision to cancel the 2020 National Convention and area conferences. State associations were forced to make similar decisions with their state conventions. Given the progression of the coronavirus and the concerns about holding large gatherings of people, these turned out to be the right moves. At the time, we were optimistic that holding conventions would be more doable in 2021, but with the slow rollout of the vaccine and the prevalence of new virus variations, that is again in doubt. Indeed, the January area conferences were canceled and the remaining area conferences for 2021, except Mid-States, have also been canceled. We do not know whether Mid-States will eventually need to cancel. Some state conventions have already been canceled. We will not have our legislative seminar

this year. Paul Swartz is working with the Legislative Committee for possible contact with our representatives via Zoom calls.

As for the 2021 National Convention, we will need to make a decision sometime in April as to whether we can hold a convention of our size. We will be consulting with the state presidents and state secretaries and are providing them with the information we have that will help us all make the right call.

Processing Grievances and Conducting Arbitrations

The pandemic may have changed the way they do their jobs, but our stewards, representatives, Executive Committee persons, Director of Labor Relations, and legal counsel continue to represent our membership "on the ground": processing grievances, meeting with postal labor reps, reviewing cases for appeal to arbitration, and conducting arbitrations. Due to strict quarantine and travel restrictions, most of our labor relations meetings are taking place remotely.

The arbitrators on our panel have undergone extensive training in holding virtual hearings and all of our arbitrations have proceeded smoothly via Zoom. Because our representational work has continued as zealously as ever, we now have only 75 cases awaiting Area Arbitration, 39 of those appealed in last six months. Given the backlogs in years past, this is remarkable.

RRECS

We continue to discuss the implementation of the completed Rural Route Evaluated Compensation System (RRECS) with the Postal Service. The last component, the individual mapping of all rural routes, was put on hold last spring due to the health concerns of the pandemic and limiting personal exposure of employees. The parties are now discussing a path forward using data already collected from the MDD scanners carried daily by rural carriers.

All rural carriers are reminded that data is being collected every day from your MDDs that may affect your initial evaluation under RRECS. This is because the data used for implementation will reflect the previous 12 months of mail volume and scanner information. It is imperative that you use the scanner as directed, including scanning all parcels at the point and time of delivery.

Other Issues

- *Pandemic Safety and Health:* We continue to monitor and work with the Postal Service on COVID-safety issues in the workplace.

- *Monitoring the New Administration:* Just weeks into the Biden Administration, we have seen a lot of change at the agencies that impact our work as a union. Most notably, President Biden fired the National Labor Relations Board's General Counsel, Peter Robb. The General Counsel is the top prosecutor for the NLRB and holds a lot of sway over unions' ability to enforce labor laws when employers violate them. The new Acting General Counsel, Peter Ohr, has a much more pro-union record than Robb and we are hopeful that he aggressively enforces the National Labor Relations Act. Likewise, we are thus far encouraged by President Biden's picks to lead the Department of Labor and its various divisions (OSHA, Office of Labor-Management Standards, etc.). As these new administrators settle in, we will work to build relationships with them and their staffs so that we can use the agencies as resources and tools for carrying out our work as a union.

Getting USPS Employees the COVID-19 Vaccine

Early last month, I wrote letters to President Biden and the governors of all 50 states expressing my concern that rural letter carriers, and other employees of the USPS, are currently not able to access the COVID-19 vaccine as essential, front line workers according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Phase 1b plan.

When the CDC issued its guidelines for prioritizing vaccine recipients, employees who work in the healthcare industry and residents in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities were understandably first in line. However, in a CDC recommendation on December 22, 2020, the CDC indicated that USPS employees, as essential front-line workers, should be included in the Phase 1b vaccine group, the next group of recipients.

However, to date, the COVID vaccine has not been made readily available to rural letter carriers and other postal employees. While the decision to distribute and administer the

vaccines is up to each individual state, I have not seen any effort by the states to begin vaccinating postal employees, despite the fact that we are currently in Phase 1b of distribution.

The Postal Service has also been left in the dark about what to tell its employees regarding when they can expect to receive the vaccine. Unlike other federal agencies that have had the opportunity to purchase or were provided allotments of the vaccine, such as Veterans Affairs, the Departments of Defense and State, the Indian Health Service, and the Bureau of Prisons (as identified in a January 25, 2021 Government Executive article), the Postal Service has not been provided with any vaccine allotment.

In my letters, I respectfully requested that the Biden Administration and state governors take swift and decisive action to make the vaccine available to all rural letter carriers and other postal employees.

The Postal Service has the ability to get the vaccine into the arms of its employees. Postal employees have worked tirelessly on the frontlines throughout the entire pandemic, delivering essential items such as stimulus checks, ballots, and medications. It is a shame that these same employees who have put their health and their lives on the line, are not being provided with access to vaccines and in many cases are being skipped over or moved down the priority list. We cannot allow this to happen to rural letter carriers and the hundreds of thousands of other dedicated Postal Service employees.

On February 5, Rep. Stephen Lynch (D-MA), along with Representatives Gerry Connolly (D-VA), Brenda Lawrence (D-MI), and Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney (D-NY), introduced H. Res. 108, a House Resolution "expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that the dedicated employees of the United States Postal Service are frontline essential workers and must be prioritized accordingly for the purposes of the COVID-19 vaccination program and State vaccine distribution plans."

I would like to thank Representatives Lynch, Connolly, Lawrence, and Chairwoman Maloney for introducing this important House Resolution to make sure postal employees are properly prioritized as essential frontline workers.

Overcoming Unprecedented Challenges

No one ever envisioned that our world would change overnight, as it did a year ago.

Yet, the NRLCA has been working on all of the issues discussed above, and more, in the face of these unprecedented challenges. I and my fellow Board members have been on daily teleconferences to address COVID issues, including providing PPE to employees. And we have continued the work of the union: managing over 300 NSS employees, preparing for contract negotiations, and handling and arbitrating grievances, despite limitations on travel, despite being down one National Board member due to a serious illness, despite a contentious election season that saw heavy mail ballot volume, and despite working with a brand-new Postmaster General. It has been quite a year and a year where the safety and security of our bargaining unit has been paramount.

The pandemic forced the cancellation of the 2020 National Convention—something that has not happened since World War II—as well as innumerable conferences and state meetings. And now, with a slow vaccine rollout and new virus variants in the mix, we again find ourselves having to consider what will happen with this year's convention and meetings. To make matters worse, the hotel which was to host our 2022 National Convention notified us that it has filed for bankruptcy and is permanently closed.

We have faced and been addressing countless new pandemic-related issues from the unprecedented increase in parcels and work hours. Many rural carriers are experiencing an increase as much as 4 or 5 times what they had been receiving at a time when the Postal Service is plagued by personnel shortages caused by sick or quarantining carriers. This results in dangerous conditions such as carriers being on the street late at night. That is why we proposed MOUs to compensate carriers for all hours worked over the weekly evaluation and provide assistance on rural routes to ensure carriers could get off the street at a reasonable hour. This is also why we filed the Step 4 described above, as we believe the contract calls for additional compensation, which would amount to millions of dollars for rural letter carriers.

And while we had been making significant progress on mapping routes for the RRECS implementation over the last few years, the pandemic has ceased that implementation and also limited the Postal Service's ability to conduct mail counts. While a large number of rural carriers are working over their weekly evaluation, approximately 70% of rural routes are under evaluation. Although parcel volume has increased dramatically, letter and flat mail is at an all-time low. If we count routes using the old method, we will

receive only 30 seconds per parcel, as opposed to about 2-4 minutes under RRECS. We are working with the Postal Service to possibly implement RRECS before mapping is complete, but you can see why it is so important for us to get back on track.

We realize that much of this work may not always be obvious or visible to all of you who are out there giving it your all to make sure the mail is delivered every day, but we assure you that each and every one of us, and each and every one of your representatives, has been working and continues to work just as tirelessly to overcome these challenges and get us through this crisis.

Thank you, and please stay safe.

Ronnie Stutts

President, NRLCA To read the full article on the National Website, click here

<https://www.nrlca.org/News/1302>