

Wayne State University Labor Archives - Vince Sombrotto Part 1

Q: This is Mike Smith, interviewing former President of the National Association of Letter Carriers, Vince Sombrotto, at the Branch 36, Vince Sombrotto Building in New York City. The date is May 11, 2006. Vince, I'd like to start right at the beginning. Where were you born, and if you could tell me a little bit about your parents and your heritage.

A: Well, I was born not too far from this building, right in New York City, in Manhattan. Actually on 116th Street and Pleasant Avenue. I'm a native New Yorker. My parents were Raymond Sombrotto -- that was my father -- and my mother was Agnes Sombrotto, maiden name was McCormack, she was Irish. She came here from Ireland; she immigrated to the United States. My father was born here in the United States. I lived almost my whole life within two blocks of where I was born. Up until 1969, I lived within two blocks of where I was born. And in 1969 I was married. I had at that time six children, and I bought a home on Long Island and moved to Long Island. But I've always been, as I said, living in New York and Manhattan within just a block or two of where I was born.

Q: What did you father do for a living?

A: He did a lot of things. He was a mechanic. He worked

early on for UPS, back in 1930, I guess it was, delivering packages during the Christmas rush. He also worked up in Alaska on the pipeline. He did a lot of different things.

Q: And your mother, did she work as well?

A: No, she didn't work for the longest time. I have two sisters, and after they -- after we all grew up, and she found that she had time on her hands, she went and she worked as a seamstress, in the garment industry for a number of years, at which she ultimately received a very small annuity for the years that she worked in that industry.

Q: So good working class roots?

A: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: While you mentioned your wife, perhaps you could tell us her name and a little bit about her, and your family at this point.

A: Yeah, my wife's name is Ray -- her maiden name was Louisey. She also had an Italian father and an Irish mother. So all our children, seven of them, all are products of either Italians or Irish. I used to say the -- the Irish were known for their literary talents in writing, in poetry, and the Italians for their great ingenuity and in (inaudible) of this, and engineering, geez, you think of what the Romans did, it's incredible. But that's our background as

far as my family is concerned. I have seven, as I said, I have seven children.

Q: Very productive.

A: Yeah, never productive. (laughter)

Q: And you have 12 grandchildren?

A: Yes. All terrific kids, and we've been blessed by that, thankfully. I have one daughter that's a doctor, one that's a teacher. My youngest daughter, she's a teacher. I have two daughters that are just housewives. They have a number of children, Jackie has four, Leslie has five. And so they take care of their family. Their husbands, thankfully, are terrific providers, so that's not a problem. And I have another daughter, my oldest daughter, Gloria, she's -- she works in business, and she has one daughter. And let's see, I've got two sons. Both of them are in the union business. Both of them are presidents of independent unions. So they're well grounded in the business of being union representatives.

Q: And could you tell us a bit about growing up, your education?

A: Well, I grew up in a very, very -- they would call them ghettos now, in East Harlem -- very poor neighborhood, made up of -- a transitional neighborhood. At one time it was a Jewish neighborhood, an Irish neighborhood, and then it

became an Italian neighborhood. Now it's a Latino neighborhood, mostly Puerto Rican. But, I grew up during the Depression, very difficult times. I know what it is to be without, know what it is to depend on the government to help you. During FDR's term, they had these surplus stores that would give people that were really, almost destitute, food like flour, butter, eggs, stuff like that. You know, the surplus foods that they got from the farmers, they gave it to these places where they'd hand it out. And so we lived like that. My sainted mother was into apples. She made more apple pies than the ground -- I love apple pies, that's never gone away from me. But, so my beginning was always in an environment of need. It was always something, because of the events that took place after the Wall Street Depression, and the Depression we had in the '30s.

Q: And then did -- did, well, I don't know when you graduated -- did you graduate from high school?

A: I went, yes, to high school. I went to James Monroe High School in the Bronx. Yes.

Q: And then after high school?

A: No, I never -- I went into the Navy.

Q: Right after high school?

A: And I never -- I never took up any advanced education -- though I had a chance to go to Princeton free of charge. I

went to a summer camp from -- a summer camp that was sponsored by a group in Yorkville. And that's a section of New York. And because of my activities within that camp, I guess I was about 15 years old, or 14 years old, the counselors there said, you know, we could get you a scholarship into Princeton, you know. How are your grades and so on? I said they're good, you know, they're all right. So they said they were looking to -- it's a question of upward mobility to get poorer people a chance, and that was -- they were doing that in Princeton. But I wasn't interested, I wanted to go to work and you know, help out the family. So I didn't go to Princeton and I regretted that of course.

Q: Did you get a job immediately after high school, or go into the Navy?

A: No, I went into the Navy. And then I came out of the Navy and me, I was -- I didn't know what I wanted to do. So I just kind of stumbled around for a few years. I got out of the Navy in 1945.

Q: When did you go into the Navy?

A: In 1943. The beginning of 1943, and I came out the end of -- just about two years. But I had -- I had obtained a number of credits. You know, then they had a thing you got for every six months you were overseas and so on, and so

forth, and every six months you were in the service, you got so many points. And then, I think it was 29 points you needed to get to get out of the -- to be discharged. And I made it, and I got out of the Navy on October 11, 1945.

Q: And you served in the Navy on a destroyer?

A: Yes.

Q: Could you --

A: Destroyer escort.

Q: Destroyer escort. And could you tell us a little bit about that, just to summarize?

A: Yeah. We -- we sailed around the North Atlantic and the South Atlantic. I spent some time, almost eight months in Brazil. We worked out of that part of the South Atlantic. We worked out of Trinidad, Bahamas in Brazil. Went out to Sao Paulo and also Rio. But that's where we worked, and of course there were submarines, German submarines in that area.

Q: And your record says you served with distinction, so I assume you saw some action.

A: I said -- well, yeah. But I say distinction, because that everybody says that. That's almost a cliché now, and my comment on that was what I said before -- distinction means you got out alive (laughter).

Q: Yeah. So, you get out of the Navy in 1945, and I'm jumping

ahead slightly. You became a letter carrier in 1947. What did you do in between?

A: Well, not too much. I joined what was then the Army Transport Service. That was, as an able-bodied seaman, and they went to Germany and to Italy, right after World War Two. That was in 1946, right after the -- well, the first thing I did was collect my -- my \$20 a week from the government. You know, they had a club, 5220, when you were discharged. The government gave every discharge 52 weeks to get a job. If you didn't get a job, they gave you \$20 a week to tide you over. So I waited until I exhausted my 52 weeks. I guess that doesn't say much about me but that's -- that's what everybody in my neighborhood was doing.

Q: Had some fun.

A: That's exactly it. And I kind of staggered around from one job to another job, all kind of things. I worked at Pressman and painting vehicles, you know, all kinds of stuff. Didn't stay with them too long. And of course, as I said, my mom, she said: "Look, you got to do something. Why don't you go to work in a post office." We had a guy in our building -- we lived in a tenement house -- Andy, Andy Rico, Andy Stronser rather, Czechoslovakian family. He's working in a post office. So when there was a chance to work there for the Christmas time, I said all right,

I'll go to work. And I just was doing that to placate my mother. I had no intention of ever working in the postal service. And these are things of fate, there's no way that you can analyze why things happen the way they do. But when I went in, I was working in a certain place in the post office called the "Grey Bar" building, and when the time came for me to be discharged with all the temporary employees, they didn't discharge me. They had me in the Grey Bar building, it's like they forgot about me. And so they were asking everybody to turn in their badges, but they didn't ask me. So I asked them -- cause I was looking to turn in my badge! Cause I was looking to go down to Florida, as a young man, and go in where all the action was.

Q: Young single man at this point.

A: Yes, right. I'm single, right. And they never -- they never let me go. I mean, it was just a caprice in some way that my name slipped, and I stood on and I kept working. And I was working next to a guy who said to me, "Why don't you just take the test? You're a veteran, you can open up the test, and you know, why don't you do it? I said all right, and I took it. And I'm proud to say my mark was one of the highest. I had, I think, it was 104, because you get the service credits, you know, you get extra points.

But anyway, so I took the test, and I made it, and then I made -- they made me a regular employee, and that's how that happened. I thought that -- I always tell this story. I was walking down 45th Street, towards Lexington Avenue, and I was preparing mentally to go to Florida. And as we were walking down the street, and I was saying I'm going to give up this job, 'cause I want to go to Florida. And there was a carrier, I'll never forget his name. George Krakow. He told me, "You ain't going to go, you ain't going to give up this job." Once people come to work on this job they never, they never leave it, you know. Course, it wasn't a pressure job at that time, which over the years, then it really turned into a pressure job. But -- and he was right, George Krakow. He turned out to be right. So that -- so that was how I wound up in a post office, and I took the test, I became a regular employee. And I got the benefits of being a regular employee, which were important. And I just, you know, went along on the job, enjoying it because there's a lot of camaraderie in the post service.

Q: What was your first job? The actual work that you did? Was it delivery?

A: Yes, delivering mail. I delivered on -- by the route I was working, I was route 12. It delivered in 52 Vanderbilt

Avenue, the Yale Club, 347 Madison Avenue, 345 and 341 Madison Avenue. Oh, 20 story buildings, that was the route I caught. Just a square block, really. And I was on that route for the better part of 20 years.

Q: Wow.

A: In my lifetime, once I got something, I stayed with it. And the interesting thing is my children do the same thing. (laughter) We don't flitter around from one thing to another.

Q: So what was -- when you started, you mentioned camaraderie, and of course, that's a good, solid job. And I know that that's what most parents want -- I know my parents are the same way. Get a good, solid job.

A: Well, a government job was always -- if you grew up during the Depression, one thing you knew, if you worked for the government, you had a -- you were not going to get fired. I mean, that was the thing. And then high benefits. Whatever the benefits were, as minimal as they were back in the '40s, they were benefits. Other people didn't have it, like vacations and stuff like that.

Q: What were the working conditions like, the way you were treated by the postal service at that time?

A: It was a different time, because it didn't pay much. The salaries were very, very low. So you had a rotating

workforce. So people -- management didn't have the time to be aggressive or oppressive towards the employees, because they couldn't keep employees. So it was a constant turnover of employees. Now, there was a bedrock of employees that stayed there for years. Like when I, the first route I was on, I told you route 12, the carriers on that route were Bill Waltman and Ralph Dalamo, and both of those people had about 36 years on the job. They came in with a horse and wagon, you know. They were my mentors. And they were hard-working guys, you know. And so I learned from them, you know, how to respect the job and so on and so forth. But as far as pressure to do the job, like as happened later on, as a job became more desirable, as the pay improved and the benefits were important, it became an important job to hold. And that's when management gets more aggressive. You can get more out of people who are fearful of losing their jobs than you can from people that don't care if they lose their jobs.

Q: Now, before you made your mark, or began to make your mark with the 1970 strike, and of course, if you'll forgive me, earned your reputation as a rabble-rouser perhaps, well certainly not as -- you weren't a shrinking violet, but somewhere between 1947 and 1970, you must have had a change of heart, a change of philosophy, as well as experience.

A: Yes, that's an interesting question you raise, and a poignant one, because in 1958, I was fired from the job. And the reason I was fired was because I called in sick. I had been going to Long Beach, which is a seaside place. We got a bungalow, we had about four children then, and I went to Long Beach, and I suffer from an allergy -- hay fever, or whatever. And while we were there, I called in sick, because I had an attack of hay fever -- and somehow, what they did in those days, and they still do it now to some extent -- they sent a shoefly -- you know what a shoefly is, a guy that's an investigator -- he went out to see if I was at home. And he went to the building that I lived in, and of course, I wasn't at home cause I was out in Long Beach. And he asked -- I'll never forget, his name was Damico, the man that went out. And he went and asked my neighbor, who lived on the next floor from us. We lived in a three-family house. And the woman, Annie, who was a longtime friend said, "I don't know." You come from my neighborhood, anybody asks you a question, you say I don't know. You know, that's the way it went. So she says, "I don't know." So OK, he came back and said, "Oh, he called up sick and he wasn't even home, and nobody knows where he is." So they fired me for that. Well, it so happens that I did go to the doctor. And the doctor -- and these are

crazy things that happen in life -- I go to the doctor, and the nurse didn't make out the fact that I went to the doctor. So, when they investigated, they called the doctor. They asked the nurse and she didn't know, but the doctor did. So when I went to the union to get represented, I said, "Look, they fired me, I didn't do anything wrong. I was working --" course what happened is when I called in sick, the fellow that picks up the cord, that picks up the phone -- they called it a cord or whatever -- he said, "Can't hear you too good." I said to him, "That's because I'm out here in Long Beach," you know, on Long Island. He remembered that, see, and so when I needed a witness, he said, "Yeah, he called and he told me he was in Long Beach." So what happened was that the union didn't believe me. They took management's word, and they said, "I can't help you, because you lied, you said you were sick and you weren't." So I fought the case myself, and ultimately, I won it. This was through the Civil Service Commission, used to hold it over in the news building, is where they held the hearings. And the man said -- the hearing officer was a man by the name of Delay. "That's interesting." Anyway, he, they found that I made a case and I wasn't guilty, and so they sent a note to return me to work. At that point, the postal service appealed it

to Washington. So they appealed it and had to fight the appeal. So that meant that I was out almost a year. I won the appeal in Washington as well. So then they had to return me to work, and then I really got balky, I said I want the same locker I had, I want the same route I was on, I don't want to be -- it's like it never changed. And they had to pay me nine months' back pay. So that experience created some problems for me. One, with the postal service, and a grievance procedure and the way it worked, and two, with the union, that sometimes they doubted people, people that were there to protect me didn't when I needed them. And I did it myself.

Q: At this point in time, how would you characterize the relationship of the letter carriers union with management? It sounds like it was a fairly cozy relationship.

A: Yes, it was, because that was the environment. I make no - - there's no criticism of the way they operated because that's the way it was. It was in every part of government. When you worked in the government, when you work for governments, you have to -- postal service was a part of government, it's not like it is now. At that point, it was considered a part of the government, and you worked together. You know there wasn't -- there were cozy relationships.

Q: Perhaps cozy is a poor word, but --

A: Well, that's OK, because sometimes it worked to the advantage of the employees. They could get things done. Sometimes they weren't, but that's the system I didn't like, this tradeoff. You give me one, I give you one, and I was dead set against that. All the years that I was in leadership, I never made a deal like that saying, if you put Mike back to work, I'll owe you one. No, I never did that.

Q: So this was sort of an epiphany for you in 1958. And did you start becoming more active in union affairs after that point?

A: No, not too much, because I didn't think the union did anything. Of course, all we ever did was we wrote letters. They would come to -- we used to call them the delegate, now they call them the shop stooge. Of course, you got your pay increase, earn your benefits, these came through the Congress. So if you wanted to get something, you had to sit down and write letters to your local Congressman, and say, you know, support HR whatever. And so that's all they ever did. Now, as Tip O'Neill once told me in the 1950's, there was only one lobbying group that was strong in the whole United States, and that was the Letter Carriers. They spoke for the letter carriers, they spoke

for the federal employees. Any of the benefits came because of the kind of political structure that was created in the Letter Carriers. And that's a tribute to the people that were my predecessors like Bill Doherty, Keating and all the rest, because that's the way they operated. Going all the way back to the 1900's, or the late 1800's. That was the only way you could get things done, so they understood politics.

Q: That's an interesting point that you raise because my reading of the history is that the Letter Carriers were political long before other unions. Perhaps in a bit of a different way, you know, internal politics, as you say, working with the government. But still, having a lobby and having political know-how, and learning the federal system, it sounds like the Letter Carriers were -- at least had some experience and were ahead of the game, so to speak.

A: Well, you know, Jerome Keating was the Vice President of the NALC while Bill Doherty was the President. And he did -- and they both did a -- pulled the political work. But Jerome knew the name, he was a first-name basis with the 435 members of Congress. I mean, that's how they operated. They knew everybody, they were close to everybody.

Q: So when did you start to become active in the union?

A: Well, I didn't think that there was much there cause I was

-- I had a family, I was raising a young family. I had, as I said, six children. Right around the time of the strike, I had my sixth child, which is my youngest son.

Q: Could I ask when you married?

A: Oh geez, you're going to get me.

Q: Uh-oh. Get you in trouble with Ray.

A: Well, I'm not --

Q: We won't show her this part. (laughter)

A: I got married -- this I know, February 23, 1958, I believe.

Q: Oh, about the time you had -- you were out of work.

A: Yeah, I went out of work just about that time.

Q: Oh boy.

A: But I had -- I went into the trucking business while I was working -- of course, you needed more than one job just to survive. The pay was very little.

Q: Did many letter carriers have second jobs?

A: Oh, most every letter carrier had a second income. Most every letter carrier had a second job. And so, I had this business I was in, you know, picking up mail from -- people that sent a lot of mail out, to get it to the post office, I would come by, pick it up, deliver it to the post office for them. And it was like a job right after work, starting at three o'clock in the afternoon, after I finished working at the post office, and worked till about six o'clock.

That was it, you know, and it was a business, and it was pretty good. It was a good way to supplement -- see, the post office was like your anchor. You were always going to earn a living. Whatever it was, as meager as it was, it was going to be there. Everything else you did was --

Q: Icing on the cake?

A: Well, not only that, but it was not permanent. Course, you could -- you could have it today and lose it tomorrow. But the post office, as long as you got up like my partner used to say -- my partner on the route that I worked on would say, "As long as you can get up in the morning, come in and punch the clock, you'll be all right. That's all, that's what you have to do." And so you're going to have the job. You only got fired for cause, if you didn't give them cause to fire you, you stayed on the job. So I didn't see it was a great deal to be gained by being involved. I was a union member. They used to come around and collect your dues, you know, with a book -- they write them down, that's before Dues Checkoff came into play after 1962. When President Kennedy's made it -- made it his -- what was the number, Executive Order 10999, giving us the right to some minimum collective bargaining - minimal -- you know, it was just for local conditions. Not on wages and fringe benefits. All you could negotiate was safety and stuff

like that. So you know, it wasn't much to the union. The union could only represent you if you got in a little trouble on the working floor, but that was mostly it. And if there was a pay raise that they were working on through the political aspect of the arm of the union, to rally around those -- see, there's an example. See the picture there? [refers to the picture on wall in Branch 36 Board room] One on the steps, that fellow on the left, he was a President of the union.

Q: Ah, right on the steps of the -- a photo on the steps of the Capitol.

A: Yeah, right.

Q: Well, was there a moment where --

A: Yes, the moment came on July 1, 19 -- July 1, 1970. Or '69, excuse me. July 1, 1969, where a number of letter carriers and some clerks in two stations in the Bronx -- Throggs Neck and Kings Bridge -- didn't report to work on that day.

Q: A Wildcat strike?

A: Everybody said they're on strike. Well, of course, you could -- you could feel how that hit the -- like where I was working in Grand Central, which was the biggest station in New York, with the most carriers working, it went like wildfire, it was like electricity. Wow, are we going out

on strike? What's happening here. And from a moment of complete euphoria, everybody was so excited about this to having a dash of cold water on you, because they said -- the leadership - that they did it on their own, that it had nothing to do with us. They just did it on their own. Now, anybody who has any idea what the difference is between Kings Bridge and Throggs Neck would know, we were on communications, you couldn't work that out. So it was a plan that they had thought they wanted to do. It was -- and I can get into that when I talk about the strike and the genesis of the strike. And you'll see how it fits together, but they just deserted those people. And of course, the people -- the carriers and the few clerks that were involved -- were terrified because now they thought they're going to go to jail, and they're going to get these \$10,000 fines, and the union now was saying they did it on their own, which wasn't true. So, that got me started. Right then and there I said, "There's something rotten in Denmark." Now, if the carriers did what they did, then they've got to be defended, they got to be protected. And that's how I got involved. I started going to the meetings, and I started -- you say rabble-rousing, I got people, I looked at them, anybody that spoke up, and they sounded that they're intelligent or articulate, I got their

names and formed a cadre of people from everywhere. Ultimately we got them paid. We got -- we came to a meeting. I called for a special meeting, based on our bylaws at the time. And we went to the meeting -- we had I guess a couple of hundred people at the meeting, or maybe less than that. Not too much less. But anyway, the people that voted to pay them, we wanted to pay them two days of what their salaries would've been that they lost because they got two weeks suspension, which they're allowed to use their vacation. So they got a suspension, they paid themselves, that's how they got their vacation, you know. Which was terrible, and beyond that, the clerks had about eight or nine people that went out, and they paid them two thirds of the pay. They didn't hesitate, they just paid them. So we had the vote. It was an interesting dynamic. All of the shop stewards and retirees that came to the meeting were on one side of the room, and all the guys in uniform on the other cause our meetings were always right after work. Our meeting would start at four o'clock, and carriers were off at three, or 2:30, whatever. So if you went to the meeting, you went in uniform. So you had one part of the room was all uniformed, and the other was all suits. But, we didn't get two-thirds of the vote. We lost, cause that was the bylaw, you had to get two thirds.

So we didn't get the two thirds, and I said that's OK. We'll be back. And they said, "No, come on, you lost. Be a good sport." No, I said, this is not a sporting game. I'm going to get -- those guys are going to get paid. I'll keep coming back and making motions and bringing this up until we get them paid. And we finally got them paid in January of 1970, after the December 1969 meeting, or it might have been December of 1970. But the point was we kept at it until we got them paid two thirds of what they lost by taking their vacation to pay themselves. So that's how I really got started.

Q: Are you the leader at this point?

A: Yeah, I'm the guy that's getting all these people together. Getting phone calls, and you know how it works. You need somebody to start it, and then you got people that go -- they have some energy, some that have some energy, temporarily, they get involved and then they drop off. Some that stick with it, and some that go by the wayside. So, I kept organizing people. And at the same time, remember I got a family I'm raising, and I got a business to conduct. You know, it's one thing about my character, good or bad, once I get into something, I can't get away from it. So I stayed with it. Now, I knew that there was a possibility -- well, so now that -- where do we go here

now? Do you want to get into how to strike?

Q: Well, before we - yeah, because we're already starting to edge into it. So the two things I'm interested in, one you've already addressed, which is how you suddenly went from sort of, you know --

A: A passive member, yeah.

Q: -- a passive member into all of a sudden, you're the leader, which speaks very highly of your qualities. But the other thing before we start going through the strike is: what were the conditions like for letter carriers at that time?

A: Terrible.

Q: Cause it sounds like, from what you were saying in the 1950's was that pay wasn't the greatest, but it wasn't bad. But it sounds like the conditions worsened for the Letter Carriers.

A: No, it wasn't. It was never a good -- it was always a bad pay. The pay was always bad. As I said, people used to use this as a foundation, the postal service. They had other income. They had to have other jobs to support their families. But this was like a bedrock, you know, something you could depend upon. But it wasn't a great job by any stretch of the imagination. And by the 1970's, you had a couple of events that took place. See, we're getting --

you got to get into the strike, cause all of this somehow funnels into the strike. I'll tell you why it worsened. Because it was a question of relative deprivation. You're seeing other people are getting ahead, and you're staying back. So you feel that there's something wrong, and so people now will get their -- their anxieties were coming up, the fervor was coming up, and they were ready to do things. And, the walkout in I could sense that. I sensed that one when they did Kings Bridge and Throggs Neck, where no one ever thought about ever going out on strike, I realize that the potential, the possibility for people to rise up and say no more, you know, we've had enough, was here. And the question was how do you -- how do you harness that? So, it takes time. You know, we got together with people, like I said, to go to meetings. First, the idea was to get those fellows paid. That was like a goal that got people galvanized into it. Until you made it, and then you felt that, well, that was a victory, and so you're happy about that -- you really achieved something. You had this victory. But now you go back to, at that point, what was going to happen after that? That's something you have to look at. A little background. In 1968, Jim Rademacher became President of the NALC. And in his acceptance of the position after the election, he made

a speech to the convention. And one of the things he said was that: "we're going to get things done, we're going to get a pay raise." Cause they were trying to get \$10,000 a year. I mean, I had been working 23 years, and I think -- my salary wasn't even \$9,000 a year. So here, there was a bill, HR 10,000, then it was HR 4, to try to elevate the salaries. And we're going to get -- we're going to get higher wages. We're going to change this thing. And we're going to use everything in our arsenal, including the possibility of a strike. First time it was ever mentioned at a convention and Rademacher did it. Now, I don't think he -- I think when he did it, he meant it, because you get caught up in the moment sometimes. But I never think -- I don't think he really ever thought that there would ever be a strike. I mean, it was beyond -- anybody that worked in a post office didn't ever think in those terms. So, once he said that, at least some -- there was at least a spark. Somebody had talked about it. But to show you how, how the people felt, at that same convention, a fellow from California got up and said, he made a motion that if we don't get this, then we go out on strike. You know, we don't get \$10,000 -- we go out on strike. He couldn't even get a second. With 4,000 people in the hall -- not one person would second the motion. So it tells you something.

You say, well, wait a minute. These people will never go out on strike, that's impossible. Like, even Mo Biller once told me: "I never even imagined, I never dreamed that there could have -- that people would go out on strike like that. But that brother had started something. But, there was other things that were happening. He said that, and, as I just told you, he couldn't even get a second on a motion, cause the rest of the country wasn't involved in what was happening here in New York City. In New York City, you had the sanitation workers that went out on strike. They didn't pick up garbage, it was a terrible. The teachers went on strike. Al Shanker went to jail, he was sentenced to go to jail. The teachers went out on strike. The transportation workers, they went out on strike. Their President went to prison, and he died when he come out of prison. It was only ten days in jail. But when he came out, right after he came out, he passed away from a heart attack. So, you had these dynamics taking place here in New York city. Everybody was going out on strikes, they were winning them, and they got better benefits, and the city or the state realized that they were, that these people had legitimate grievances, so they worked them out, one way or another. What they used to talk about, the oath that we took, that nobody remembers

taking any oath that you wouldn't strike. But in any event, here it was. You're in this environment, you see what's going on, it's got to affect you. You got the Vietnam War going on, protests everywhere. People are rising up, you're not immune. You got grievances, you feel that you're getting -- you're getting the shaft, you -- that has to be tapped. They did the opposite, they tried to mollify it. There I was, trying to get people activated by coming to meetings and having our own meetings in churches, and places where we could get a hall to accommodate 50 people -- first time we had a meeting, we had seven people. So you have to -- you have to keep expanding. And that's what we did. And we went to the meetings, and we -- before you know it, we controlled the meeting. We controlled the meeting, controlled the union. If you can't control the meeting, then you've lost. So, it happened that we had a meeting in Manhattan here -- I'm just trying to think of the date of the meeting. It was in -- just before the strike. It was in April, and there was a motion made that we take a strike vote. Joe Rosenblatt, which is one of the fellows that I brought in with me, he made the motion at the meeting, and it was seconded and passed, and the idea was it was going to be a strike vote meeting. And we were all excited. Now, the administration

here, Gus Johnson was the President, sent the delegates, as he would call them, to every station saying, you can't vote for strike, because if you strike, you're going to go to jail, you're going to lose your job. Sort of the law as it -- as it's presenting itself. And so when we got to Manhattan center to have the vote that day, they not only did that, but they tried to do it in a way that you couldn't even have a meeting. Now, all you're going to do is walk in, and there were all chairs leading up to the voting machines. There were I believe six or seven voting machines. There were like aisles, and you would go up and vote yes or no for strike. They even tried to do it that you would vote that you would only go on strike if the rest of the country went out on strike. Or you would go out on strike only by yourself. You know, just in New York, just in branch 36. So they thought that -- you know, you say if everybody else goes on strike, it's easy, it's more cover. You say you're out there on a limb by yourself, who the hell's going to vote for that, they thought. Anyway, they had it, as I said, so that you wouldn't have a meeting and talk about why you should strike or why you shouldn't strike, and in the meantime, they were meeting, the leadership of branch 36 was meeting across the street in a gin mill, Fahey's Gin Mill, with the clerks with Mo Biller

and his executive guy. And they were talking about what was going to happen. Of course, Mo had nothing to do with the strike. But he knew that if there was a strike, it was going to affect him, and he was -- he was not too in favor of a strike either. You know, his main problem was he was afraid he was going to lose recognition, because if the vote was taken, you know, when the Post Reorganization Act was passed, that they -- that the unions that were there were going to be the unions, so they had the clerk -- one clerk union, it was a major clerk union. He belonged to the MPU, which was a smaller group. And his idea -- his fear was they were going to get swallowed, they were going to lose out. So he wasn't thinking about striking.

Q: The group that you're leading is obviously not an administration group, not Gus Johnson's group.

A: No, no, no, no, no.

Q: Are you calling yourself the Rank-and-File Movement at this time?

A: Yes. Right after the strike, we called ourselves the Rank and File Movement, because then, they said, we got to run this local. And we're going to -- we'll start it, we got to get ready for an election.

Q: So before this, it was truly a grassroots organization.

A: Grassroots, right. All together, you know, I don't want to

sound like I'm patting myself on the back, but I was there. And everybody that was there could -- would tell you that. I didn't get to be President of the National because I was not known. So, at the end of the day, when the vote came out for strike, to his credit, Gus Johnson said, "Well, we voted. That's it, we're a democratic union." So the shop stewards put up their picket lines and we're on strike. To his credit, Jack Levanthal was the President of Branch 41. He got up, he said, "Your brothers from across the river are on strike with you." You know, we're shoulder-to-shoulder. He had no right to do that, he was -- his union didn't even vote, you know. But he did it. He sensed the moment that was there. So he went along with it. Biller said no. Biller said, "I can't -- I can't say we're going out on strike. I'm in a democratic union. I got to hold a meeting, I got to get the members to vote on it." And they booed him down. But I was right behind him. So I kept bugging them. I kept saying, "Are you going to cross that picket line? You're going to cross our picket lines, you're going to cross our picket." And in his book, if you read his book, Mo Biller's, he says, he recounts that. And he said no, we won't cross your picket lines. So, well he couldn't do anything. This was a tsunami, and it took everybody. And that was it, the strike was on. Now

everybody was trying to figure out how to get out from under it. All the people in authority were trying to figure out how we're going to get out from under. Rademacher was running around, figuring that the -- this is the end of the international union, or the national union, because if he can't control this? -- and he was meeting with everybody. Secretary Schultz at the time, President Nixon, all his top aides and all those, trying to figure out how to get out from under this thing. And imagine, it lasted almost nine days, with over almost 220,000 people out on strike, with no sanction from a national organization. Now you go and figure that one out. And so somebody asked me -- a lawyer asked me, partner of Mario Biaggi, who was a Congressman from New York. He said, "How did you know that was going to happen?" I said, "If I got to tell you that, if I try to explain that to you, you'll never understand it." I'm trying to tell you, everything was in the air for that to happen. As I said, the strikes that took place in the other unions within New York City, the Vietnam War and all of the -- the attack on authority. The idea that people could fight back was there. And it just needed a catalyst to set it off, and that was it. And so that's how the strike happened. Now, the question was: how did it end? As all strikes end, the people that

started it, they get screwed because the people that can make the decisions, make whatever decisions that satisfy them and support their agenda. They got us back with a phony package. They said they had an agreement, and their package turned out not to be true. Of course, Rademacher said he never said that. Of course Jack Levanthal came back with the package he had, on a legal pad, and Rademacher said, "I never said that. I said if we could get something like this here, we could end the strike, but he never said we had anything like that." So we had to wait months and months before they passed the Postal Reorganization Act. We did get a 14% increase in wages out of it, in two stages, six and eight percent. There were some minor changes. They made compression, went from 23 years to eight years, but yeah, we could reach top salary. But at the end, most people, while they were happy with the 14% increase, now we were looking for the world. 25, 20 year retirement. Full paid health benefits, you know, all that kind of stuff opened up. We had a meeting in February where we outlined what we would go back to work for. You know, what would be a deal that we would accept. And that was called Proposition B. And we were going to go out on strike again.

Q: Well, during this period then, Rademacher is really

fighting the movement.

A: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: And I assume that he's not very pleased with you and your -
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A: No, no. He obviously wasn't pleased with me. But, what could he do about it? He couldn't do anything to me as an individual. I wasn't in a position where he could -- I was just a member. So what could he do, he couldn't do anything to me. What happened is when we took -- when we won the election in this branch, and we swept everybody out, 23 positions or 21 positions out of 21, everyone that was with the administration lost by a substantial margin, then he could do something. Because then we had to have a vote in July of 1971, of whether we'd have another strike. And I was President then, so he put me in trusteeship.

Q: When did you become President of the branch?

A: December 2 was the election, 1970. And I was installed in January. And right away we were talking about another strike, which never came up. Because a strike would've been suicide at that point. Because by now the dynamics went away.

Q: So you find yourself President of the branch 36.

A: Right.

Q: Then what? I mean, that's quite a transition because this

is all pretty much within a year and a half.

A: Yeah, yeah. One of the promises I made, along with others, was that we were going to change the union to be more democratic. First thing we were going to do was -- we were going to have everybody gets the chance to vote. One-man, one-vote, change the constitution. That if a contract is negotiated, the members have an absolute right to ratify it, whether they accept it or not.

Q: Local or national?

A: National. That all the locals can vote whether they accept the contract or not. And you just wait on the votes. A majority has to prevail. That we had three main issues. One was, as I said, that the organization, there would be a kind of a shift in the business agent. They only could be elected by the people in their area that they represent. Heretofore, the President used to appoint them. So, now we're -- now I'm President, and we got to deliver. So we go to the convention in New Orleans in 1972, but before we get there, we try to utilize a particular section of our constitution that allows for a referendum within the organization, if you could reach certain criteria. So many states, so many branches, representing so many members. If you accomplish that, then you could have a nation-wide referendum. Well, we started to do it. We needed like 200

locals, and we needed them representing some certain percentage of the membership. And don't you think that we're now in a position that we're closing the door on getting and making it? Now, they're [NALC national leaders] watching this, and they're trying to keep, you know, keep tabulating -- how many branches are signing on to this thing? Cause they're getting the information from their business agents and other sources. State presidents. And now we're closing in on a referendum. Now, if we get a referendum, there's no way they're going to stop a one-man, one-vote. That's going to -- that's going to overwhelm them -- so they -- they're dead set against it, because we're going to be going to a convention in 1972, as I said, in New Orleans, where they'll be up for election. They can't lose on a system they got with people carrying the votes of the entire branch, saying: OK, you, you represent New York City, you got 8,000 votes. And all of them are in their pockets. So, we tried to stop that, and the only way we could stop it is by changing the constitution. As I said, we were going to get this referendum. Well, we're now about, oh, I would say about 20 or 30 locals short. Now we had -- he [Rademacher] had approved a merger, he had based on a [Hawaiian] Convention, had put in something in the constitution a provision that allowed for mergers, so

we could have larger locals, instead of so many small locals. Well, Long Island had 125 locals, and now they were merging into one local. And the fear now came, and they were right, that I was going to get them to come along with me, that would have -- that would put us way over the bar. So what [Rademacher] did -- and I got to give him credit -- he was very shrewd. They voted to be dead set against the merger in the Executive Council before they went to convention. He realized that it was going to happen. If they get a referendum, it's going to happen. If you don't get a referendum, it might happen anyway, so why don't we make the constitutional change. And so he did, which was very clever. And nobody's against that. Certainly we weren't, because we won the day. We got -- it passed. Now all of the people on the Executive Council spoke against it, except -- course Rademacher was in the chair, he didn't speak either way. But it carried rather easily. The one down on business agents get elected in their own region, it lost by 80 votes. We won it, I mean, I'll tell you. They just stole it -- it wasn't even close. We won it, but they stole it, and so all right. And I said, all right, you stole it, so what? It didn't happen, now it's going to happen. You can't stop this. And the ratification carried easily. So, that was the start of

changing the union.

Q: Now, at this point, the rank-and-file movement has been formed.

A: Oh yes.

Q: And so when you're speaking about organizing nationally --

A: The rank-and-file movement was formed when we were running for office in branch 36.

Q: And you made it a formal slate at that point, or -- or a caucus?

A: Yes, yes. It was a rank-and-file slate, right.

Q: It's kind of a classic story. You've got entrenched union leadership, not just that is basically protecting their own well-being and rights against the general membership. Because you have enough people in the general membership, as you say, the momentum's there. You'd think the leadership would recognize it. Am I characterizing it...

A: Well, let me be fair now. In retrospect, I can be fair. Because they were against us, it doesn't mean that they're only protecting their own self-interest. You can make that argument, that's a strong argument to be made. But it could also be -- the argument could also be made that they actually believed in what they were doing, and so it was for the good of the union, and it was better for the membership to do it their way. That it was too risky and

too dangerous to do the things that we were offering. So, I think history records that they were wrong. I mean, what's happened since then has proven they were wrong. But it's not unusual for people, you know, power -- people don't give up power. Franco was dead for two months, and they still had him on -- he's still giving orders -- some kind of support system. So they don't give up power so easily. You have to tear it away, you tear it. I'm sure if I look in a book of quotes, somebody said that.