

Q: So, the strike is monumental for the letter carriers. You have a huge role in it, and you've not tried to overplay that, but this is really a path-breaking moment for the letter carriers. And, after the strike, you become president of the local and, then, within eight years, you're national president. I wonder if you could talk about the transition and the momentum building up to your election as NALC president.

A: Well, rightly or wrongly -- and I suspect it was just the fervor of the moment. Rademacher was so hated here; I mean, he was really *persona non grata* here; he was just hated here.

Q: Here being New York City?

A: Yeah, New York City. So the idea was we had to get rid of Rademacher, so, when we had the one man, one vote, now that was our first chance 'cause they couldn't use the proxy system where they could get to the convention where they know exactly how many votes they have and they have enough votes for them to win -- more than enough. So, here they had to put themselves up to the individuals -- you know, now people are going to vote. So, what happened was -- I didn't have an interest in running for president. As I said, I had, now, six children; my youngest son was ill for a while -- well, he was OK. I had to take care of a big family, and I had a job -- I mean, I had a job at the post office -- and I had a business that I had to take care of, so I

wasn't that much interested in running for any other office -- I didn't even run for this office -- but what I did is I sold my business to the present president and another personal friend of mine, on a contingency, on the basis that they would pay me. I would get an income from that for a certain amount of years 'till they owned it, 'till they paid. They didn't have to pay me all at one time. I was going to get so much a week for two years or three years, and the pay here was less than I was making between my business and the post office. I think the pay here was less than \$15,000 a year.

Q: Pay as branch president?

A: Yeah, so -- and I was making upwards of \$35,000 a year at that time, between my trucking business and my postal, so I actually took a loss to come here. So I sold my trucking business and I concentrated on this [Branch 36 president]. Now -- I tell you, once I got my teeth into this, I couldn't get away from it.

Q: How were you convinced to run for president and become president?

A: Of the local --

Q: Of the branch.

A: The guys that were with me during the strike, [the press] they felt that they could only win the presidency, if I was the president. That has haunted me. The same way we went for the

raise in pay -- all the offices wanted a raise, and I said I didn't care for it -- count me out, I'll speak for all of you. They said, "No! We won't get it unless you get it, 'cause if you don't get it, we won't get it, so you got to go for it." See, and that's the same thing that happened here. They said, "Let's run for office, and we got to take [Gus Johnson] out, but you got to run." I said, "Well, geez." All right. So then I was thinking, I was trying to figure out, how to run and then get away from it -- see, but you get stuck; you make commitments and then you can't back away from them, so then you win; you win overwhelmingly, and then you got a responsibility of doing what you said you could do, because nobody believed we could do it. Don't forget, there wasn't a person that had any experience in administrating a union, including me, that had to take over the largest local and it was a daunting task, but we were able to do it. I mean, it isn't a monumental task, it isn't figuring out the theory of relativity or something, but it's something because you've got the responsibility of representing 9,000 people.

A: There were groups; we had no consultants; we were --

Q: I meant personal supporters who you confided in and supported you.

A: We had a group, and they all were officers of the union. Some were more dedicated to their own position; that is to say, you know, "What was in it for me?" than -- but, that's normal too. I mean, I'm not knocking that. Most people feel that way, so you can't get everybody to be a martyr, so -- but, yeah, we had a pretty good group; we had a good group of people.

Q: Were there any particular individuals really instrumental in working with you?

A: Well, there were good people. The executive vice president was Tom Germano, who really wanted to be president, and almost tried -- well, the fact of the matter is he ultimately ran against me for -- I didn't want to stay on as president, so I said that I'm not going to run. There came a time, I said -- I think it was in 1976 or '75 -- I said I'm not going to run, and the vice president at that time, he didn't like Tommy 'cause I said, "Well, Tommy can be the president."

Q: Tommy?

A: Tommy Germano. He could be the president. See, that was a mistake on my part because he always harbored the thought about being the president for his own personal reasons, but he was a bright young man; a good solid guy. He was a teacher at Cornell -- he ultimately got to that, so -- and there were other people that wanted to get better positions, so if they stayed with him, their chances of getting -- well, anyway, he ran against me and

the long and the short of it was that he got beat pretty handily and -- they had spread the rumor that it wasn't me that did all these things; it was really him. He was really the brains behind me, see? So I said, "All right." So, at the end of the day -- and he's a very bright young man, very engaging, and he would be a good president, you know. I mean, I think he would have.

Q: What do you think was your strong suit at this point, that -- why people said that Vince is the man for the job?

A: 'Cause I could reach people. I understood them and I could reach them. That's all. I spoke their language, and they believed in me. Now, that's happened all through my career. I went all over this nation speaking to people -- diverse people -- so I'm not only speaking to New Yorkers. I went to every state in the union, and I spoke to people, and I engaged them, and they believed in me because the things I talked about were the things they think about and they want. That's all. It's not secret; it's no big formula. If you can't connect with the people, you're not going anywhere.

Q: At this time, and we're talking around 1972, a little bit past the strike, or maybe even during the strike -- do you have national connections, a national following, at this point? Where people in California might say, "Hey, this Sombratto guy out in New York knows what he's doing!"

A: No, here's a connection I can show you. The connection was this branch. What they did for me, you know, for this union, can never be repaid, and I mean for me, for the union, for the NALC. We have a publication; it's called *The Outlook*. We were able to send our views with that newspaper to carriers all over the country... all over the country. There was a carrier in my station. His name was Eddie Donovan. He came up with a brilliant idea of how to reach carriers everywhere in the country. So, what we would do with *The Outlook* is we would say: "Get the zip code" -- we had a carrier, route one, zip code 1000 -- Omaha Nebraska -- "and put it in the mail." That would get to that carrier, and he would get a copy of our [newspaper] - And, in there, we would talk about all of the things that we thought had to be done to make for a better union. Now, they [branch 36] invested tens, and tens, and tens of thousands of dollars just to -- 'cause, don't forget, we sent out thousands of these newspapers every month, and the postage -- so the branch paid for that.

Q: Would these -- these publications, were they under rank and file movement or Branch 36?

A: (overlapping) No. It was Branch 36. Now I'm the president of Branch 36, so I'm speaking out to them. See, when we ran, we ran as rank and file but when we communicated with them, we

communicated through our newspaper, and that was the start of it; and while we had that ingenious way of contacting people, that Eddie Donovan thought of, allowed us to get our ideas across the nation. Then, later on, I remember I went to Long Beach, California. I got a call that they wanted me to come out there and install the officers. The reason that was interesting is because, at the 1970 convention in Hawaii, they had a man from their local named Cvetko run against Rademacher. And, in those days -- it's funny how paranoid -- they didn't want the guy to run against the administration; they didn't want any opposition. [Shows] that one man not to run against them. When I ran for president, when we ran a one man one vote against Rademacher, we had a guy from Philadelphia who nominated himself. That's what the procedure was in our union; a person could nominate himself. Now, it's since changed. We put a really heavy lift for people to run. You need five endorsements to run, five letter carriers to endorse you or you're not eligible to run. So, these people from Long Beach called me. I went out there, and they had their own axe to grind, whatever it was -- personal things -- and Tom Connors was the president out there, and he said, "Yeah, we'll be with you," and then I met people from Los Angeles, "Chug" Overby, and got elected, and he believed. Because the stuff I was talking about, they understood and they were ready to get behind it. People in San

Francisco -- we started forming the caucus. I started what I called the national rank and file. See, the rank and file was here, [in New York] but we called the national and we met in Des Moines, Iowa.

Q: What year?

A: I guess that was about 1973. We had just a few people. You know, again, it's the people that want change and believe in change or, for their own reasons, but whatever it is, they come along, and then you've got people that are really sincere and people that are not; but, when you're starting out, you just sit down and you hear everybody and you talk to everybody. We started what we call this national rank and file movement; we had a president from Minneapolis, Minnesota, people from Long Island, as I said, a president from Des Moines, Iowa -- I'm trying to think of who else that came out there -- somebody from Boston -- so, that was the start of a national rank and file, and that took hold, too, because then we had what we called The Committee, and we would meet. Then the national tried to undermine that. See, there were people that were with me, and people that went the other way, 'cause then the national starts offering things. Then, before you know it, a guy that seems like he was dead set on changing this is now: "You know, I don't know if that's the right way to go." The next thing you know, they left town. They were on a committee in the convention of

1972, the City Delivery Committee, most of them -- about five or six presidents of major branches -- and they then said, "Let's start a rival group" called The Committee of Presidents, and we were at a national rank and file, so we hold a meeting in Washington, and I said, "Why don't we all get together?" See, I figured Rademacher was trying to undermine us by creating another group. What we did is put everybody together, and we took over both groups. You know, in a way, that's exactly what happened. To this day, that Committee of Presidents still functions.

Q: At this time, what were the primary goals for the national rank and file movement?

A: Well, we wanted a more democratic union. We wanted to have more to say about what happened; we wanted to have more to say in how contracts were negotiated and what they negotiated for. Now, I have to be totally honest with you. I told you when we went to New Orleans in 1972, we had those issues: one man one vote, regional elections for regional offices. We also talked about area wage, 'cause that was very critical in this part of the country. Now, you could ask me: "What happened? You got to be president, so what happened to the area wage?" Couldn't do anything! Even as president I couldn't do anything 'cause I could never get the executive council to support me because they all come from different sections of the country that are against

area wage. They come up with the thought, and this is their analysis -- I mean, people all over the country -- that if we get more here, they get less there, and so, you know, it's one of those things that you have credo was I want to fight the good fight. I want to fight the fights I can win, that deserve to be fought, but, if I know it's over and I can't win, there's no sense in wasting your energy. You might as well put your energy and your resources to things that are also important and focus on that. I know you could never win area wage in this union, so it's a battle that can't be won, and so don't fight it.

Q: If I could ask one more question, and perhaps I should have brought this question up when you were speaking about the 1970 strike. There were accusations that the rank and file movement had a lot of support, and active support, from organizations such as Students For A Democratic Society.

A: No, no. That was a canard. No, there was nothing to do with that nowhere. That was Mo Biller that did that, and they tried to labor us. I said that's the greatest compliment they ever paid me, because I was forty-some-odd years old and they were calling me a student. I don't know -- that's great. No, never ever.

Q: Well, I didn't know if --

A: No, I'm saying that there was none. You see, but that can linger. It shows up somewhere and you can bring it up 30 years later --

Q: Precisely.

A: -- and it's there. What can you do? You can't do anything about it. But that had nothing to do us. At this point in time, are you looking ahead to trying to be president of the --

A: No, no, no. We go to the convention in Seattle, and that's the first convention where the election of officers is going to be one man one vote.

Q: What year is this?

A: '74. Right. '74. Now, we get there, and we're going to have this election by one man, one vote, but what good is it if you don't have an election? If you don't have nominees? And if you have guys nominated 'cause it's Harry, you know, that raises his hand and says: "I nominate myself for president?" There's no contest, there's not a dynamic that's taking place, there's not a dialogue between candidates, there's not separate views of how the union should be run. It's just that you have an election. Now, they say, "Well, you've got to run." I say, "Well, wait a minute now, why should I run?" "Well, because you're the most well-known of anybody in the country, and it's your idea, from your local, that we should have one man one vote, so why don't you run?" So, OK, so I did. I ran. We

didn't do bad. We lost 70,000 or something to 45,000 or something like that. Wasn't bad. I tell you, the other candidate, that hailed from Philadelphia -- you know, you can put anybody's name on and you'd get some votes, but that's still out of the idea of having an election. Rademacher must have been stunned that we got that many votes.

Q: It's a big percentage.

A: So, that ended that because I had to raise a lot of money to run a campaign and we ran a campaign. We did mailings and stuff like that. We put out position papers so that the members could see what the difference between the candidates were. Now, he has a tremendous advantage going in, but that's all right. We did fairly well, and that ended it. The thing about it is, Rademacher was a very competent guy, smart -- I won't get at that; I won't go any further than that. I don't want to say anything derogatory. I won't. He was a smart man, but I think what happened -- he got just tired. He couldn't take all the pounding, the banging away that he's doing this wrong, he's doing that wrong, and after awhile, I guess it wore on him because, by the time 1976 came around, he decided he wasn't going to run. He was a relatively young man. I mean, Rademacher was no more than 56 years old -- maybe 57 -- and he's retiring. I didn't get elected 'till I was 56, so (pause) I guess he thought it would be easier for him. See, I always said

this: that when you're a president of a national union, there's no other place for you to go. You don't have -- you know, you're limited in what you bring to the table. There's not a big market for former presidents of unions, so, I guess, a lot of presidents find that out when they leave their position, they find out that there isn't a swarm of people trying to get to you to put you to work.

Q: So, you've made the decision by '74 that, "OK, I'll run for president, and, if elected, I'll serve," and then you start working towards 1978. Rademacher retires in '76 --

A: You see, he retired in '76, so I ran against Vacca in '76. One of the guys that was on the slate was the secretary treasurer of branch 36 -- who was with Germano when they ran against me -- he nominated for president. So it was two guys from branch 36 and Vacca. He got enough votes -- if I'd got the votes he got, I win.

Q: What was his name?

A: John Cullen. Now, he got about 5,000 votes. That would have been enough for me to win the election. Now, if he didn't run, that doesn't mean I was going to get those 5,000 votes; that wasn't going to happen. He just did that out of spite and revenge against me.

Q: Split the vote, sure.

A: But was beat in this local 25 to 1, so what the hell did he accomplish? He didn't accomplish anything, and he didn't get me beat because, like I said, I could not have gotten every one of the votes that he got. That's not just possible. So, that led -- so he won, and that was the end of it. Then you had the contract in there; you had a contract year.

Q: In 1977?

A: Yeah. That's it.

Q: So, then Vacca had just one term.

A: Yes. Well, we beat him pretty easy because he got a bad contract. I mean, what's the sense of kidding? He got a bad contract and I was able to use that against him, that's all.

Q: Was he Rademacher's chosen one for --

A: I don't know, I don't know. I think that, while they were in office together, there was not a great love affair, you know; they weren't good friends. I think after he lost, and Rademacher retired, I think they talked to each other a hell of a lot more than they talked to each other while they were in office, but -- no. He was not. Rademacher was funny that way. He's like a lot of people that are in office. They want to surround themselves with people who are very, very inferior to them. The idea is that it makes them look better, and I'm just the opposite. I figure you better get the brightest people around, get the smartest. And every guy I had around me proved

that, even Germano. He was smart enough to be the president, you know. I wanted him to run for national president. He had his mind somewhere else though, because he had a very nice history. I told him when he was running against me, I said: "If I was you running against me, you're going about it all the wrong way. You're saying all the wrong things, you know." I said, I'd be out there saying that he grew up in a family that was broken up, he didn't live at home, he was a clinger, a street urchin, you know, just living day to day, never went to school, wound up -- self educating, wound up going to college, wound up getting a degree -- all of that on a basis of what he was able to do himself, you know, and that to me that was terrific. That's what you should be talking about. What are you trying to say, you're smarter than me? They're not going to believe you. I said, like -- we used to go around and say this is like Hertz and Avis. You guys are great, you've got a selection of two people. I'm Hertz, he's Avis, what do you want? I mean, who are you going to go for? That's how that -- I told him that. "You're not going to win." We used to come back every day, go out to the stations and campaign, come back here and I'd tell him: "You're doing this wrong. You think that what you're saying is penetrating the membership, but it's not." I mean, it's a shame because he could have done good things. He was a good man, and he wound up being a teacher at Cornell

teaching labor classes, teaching in school. I watched some of the classes he taught in school. He was terrific, I mean, you know, he was a good teacher. But, well, listen, that's another -- what else do you have?

Q: Well, you find yourself president --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- in 1978.

A: Right.

Q: Obviously, bargaining is a key issue, and, it appears -- now, I'm speaking very generally. I'd like to go through some of these --

A: (overlapping) I'm going to help you with this --

Q: OK.

A: -- because there's a book that's coming out now from NALC that's going to talk about my 24 years. It comes out after the first edition that we did. We did an edition that talked about the NALC during those years, and then they'll talk about my years as president from 1978 to 1979, when I was installed, until I retired. So, a lot of the stuff that you're going to want to know about is going to be in that book, and it's going to save you a lot of time.

Q: Well, that's good, but I'd still like to hear some of this in --

A: Oh yeah.

Q: -- your own words, your own voice.

A: Oh yeah, well, John Miller did a lot of that. He wrote it.

Q: So you find yourself president. I'm going to speak just generally, right now, because I'd like to go through a couple specifics. Contract bargaining -- nobody becomes president of a union if they can't deliver good contracts -- but you also took National Association of Letter Carriers into social justice issues the leadership of the union had not addressed before. You certainly supported a number of civic organizations, and, obviously, the politics. So, I just wanted -- we can start --

A: Well, be specific. What --

Q: I see that you've bargained seven contracts: three of them were voted in; four of them went to arbitration. Is there any sort of general philosophy that you had regarding bargaining?

A: Well, you know, collective bargaining is an institution that stands on its own. It's been around for a long time, and the art of collective bargaining is to try to reach an accord with the other side. In a perfect world, that satisfies both parties or dissatisfies both parties. Either way it works out. Of course, each side has needs. If you get into politics, and if you get into rhetoric to charge up the membership for political reasons, or for whatever, it limits your ability to negotiate, because if you're constantly tearing down the

opposition, then you can't work with the opposition; you can't shake hands and say, "We've got an agreement," because if you're constantly attacking them, then it's difficult to come to an accord because if you ask for things that are beyond their ability to give them to you, then all you do is disappoint the people that you represent. So, the idea is to figure out what is achievable. What can you achieve? -- not the grandiose idea that you want the world. What can you achieve? What would be satisfactory to the membership itself? What would they put their arms around? And, if you can reach that, you're going to be successful.

Q: What do you consider your greatest bargaining success?

A: To get to level six, because everybody told me it wasn't possible, including Rademacher. He later told me: "I don't know how you did that." It took time. Again, it was incremental steps over a period of time, because we could never achieve it as long as we were in coordinated bargaining with the clerks because if I ask for level six, they want level six, and it wasn't -- we had a better case for level six than they had. No, they had a lot of level six positions and level seven positions, but for the general clerk, they didn't have six. They had level fives, too, but, for us, we had, in my judgment, a prima facie case for level six, and we could never achieve that as long as we were in coordinated bargaining, so I had to get away from

that, which we did. Now everybody tells you that's the wrong strategy. Well, it may be in some environments, but it wasn't in our case, because they [postal workers] were actually holding us back. I want to see them be successful because they're important, but -- and there are people involved there -- but we cannot, from our standpoint, keep subsidizing them, because, see, they lost so many jobs. You see, technology is really attacking their positions.

Q: Let me put bargaining in another context. What was your biggest disappointment in bargaining? Or do you have any?

A: (pause) That's a hard question, because (pause) the fact of the matter is every contract that I was associated with went to arbitration or was ratified. The members always ultimately accepted. So I don't know if there's any real disappointments because I never really went for things that were not achievable. If I didn't get level six, that would have been a major disappointment because I thought that was set-up in a perfect way. It took years to achieve it, but it was a series of contracts that built up to that, and when it came, you know, it shocked everybody. They thought I was tilting at windmills, but when it came -- even the lawyers, they were -- they said, "Geez, how did..." (pause) Well, it was a great thing because I had thought about it and I was driven by it and I had a plan and it worked out.

Q: Well, maybe switch gears slightly here? Did you have some overriding philosophies on what a president of the Letter Carriers should be doing?

A: It should be close to the membership, always be available to the membership. That's why I traveled so much, and that's -- I must say Bill Young's doing the same thing, and I applaud him for it. He says he learned that from me. Well that's OK, I'm pleased if he had. But, to speak to the members, never shy away from them. Always. As I said, if you go to a meeting, don't be afraid that people are going to ask questions that are going to embarrass you. There's always a question like that, but there's always an answer, and if you're truthful in your answers, in the end, you'll be all right. It might cause you a little pain for a while, but that doesn't matter because they have to know that you're with them. Members have to know that.

Q: Well, the other thing I was interested in asking about your political work. I think probably more than any other union, maybe -- I don't think that's an overstatement -- the president of the National Association of Letter Carriers has to deal with politics in Congress and national politics at a national level. Now, I know unions like the UAW, the Teamsters, SEIU, they will have a moment and testify in front of Congress, but you were

intimately involved, and my impression is that it's like almost a day-to-day operation --

A: It is, it is.

Q: -- for the president.

A: It is.

Q: How do you feel about your experiences there?

A: Well, it's necessary as you point out. See, most of the other unions, their politics to a large extent, to a great extent, are local. If you're talking about any other union: Teamsters, UAW, they will be involved in governor's races, house races -- state house races -- because they pass laws in those states that effect their members. With us, it's only Congress that can pass the laws that really affect our members, so we're really focused on the national level. We don't get focused on the local level -- mayors, and governors -- they're important, in some ways, to us too. We support them if we think that they're the people that you should be on their side because they're rising stars or they can be somebody you want to have on your side later on in their careers, but, by and large, we concentrate on the national Congress -- Congress and the presidency. That's where our focus is.

Q: How did you like dealing with Congress and presidents?

A: Oh, I liked it. I'll tell you, I met with President Carter in the Oval Office. I met with all the presidents in the Oval Office. I met with President Carter, President Bush I, President Bush II, President Clinton, all of them in the Oval Office; but when I met with President Carter -- the aide tells you go in and you sit down, you know, and he says: "You got to relax -- don't be nervous. Just be relaxed. Do your best." You speak for about three or four minutes, and about fifteen minutes later -- Carter never had a chance. I was on him. We were talking about -- at that point, the major issue was the merger of social security with civil service for retirement. That was an issue that they were floating to put the pensions or the annuities for, letting all federal employees into the social security system, which was a death knell for us.

Q: This was 1979?

A: Yes.

Q: And you became president January 1979.

A: So, here I am talking to the President, and I'm telling him: "Now, you can't merge these two because, remember, you're a civil servant." When I left, the fellow that had lunch with me and was briefing me said: "You got to be kidding me!" He said, "Geez, I've seen heads of state come in here and freeze up in this office, and then you just took over" I said I always felt like I'm talking to another person, that's all. He's the

President; I respect that. Now, I'll tell you about Bush II. On the anthrax situation, that was a major problem for the government. They didn't know whether these people -- terrorists -- were putting anthrax into the mail, and what would be the result of this. A biological attack on the United States? So, I met with the Director of -- who became the Director of Homeland Security, former governor of Pennsylvania, Tom Ridge, who was an old friend of mine. When he was first running for Congress, I met him in Erie, Pennsylvania, and we hit it off. When I came in, he says: "Vince, you come in with me and see the President." So we went into the Oval Office, and we're sitting there, and talking about how terrible this is, you know, and these terrorists, what they're doing. The President asks me a question. He says: "How long have you been president of your union?" And I say to him: "Longer than you're going to be President of the United States." I didn't mean it as an insult. I meant, I've been 24 years president and you can only run one more term. I meant it in that context, but you should have seen the way he was shocked. (pause) The Postmaster General was with me -- also a friend because his father and I played basketball together -- he was shocked. Everybody was shocked. They said: "How the hell can you say something like that to the President of the United States? I've always relaxed. With Bill Clinton? If Bill Clinton would walk into the door, just like Tom Ridge --

I was walking through La Guardia airport, got off the shuttle, I see him [Ridge] sitting down. "Hiya Vince," he says. -- If Clinton walked through that door, he'd say: "How 'ya doing, Vince?" That's the way I talked to him. I called him Bill, and he never said anything. I had the most interesting dinner in the world one time at Vernon Jordan's home with the President and four or five other people. He proceeded to tell me all the problems that were going to face this nation that we're not even paying attention to, and one of the things was global warming. He was talking about, "them icecaps keep melting; there'll be a disaster on this planet." He talked about AIDs, and he talked about major issues that we don't talk about. See, these are not important issues to people? What's important? How are you on abortion? How are you on gun control? These are the things that people get all excited about, and issues that are really important, they just don't even pay attention to.

Q: Anthrax had to be very scary for the members of the Letter Carriers.

A: Oh sure, and I had to go to all the places where it showed up, even a threat of it or a hint of it. I had to go to New Jersey, to Trenton, where there was some -- and I had to go here [New York] -- I had to go in to Washington D.C., to those stations, and visit the carriers there. That's your job, you know. Some people get afraid. They say: "Well, if it wasn't

anthrax there" -- you know, that's what I've got to do. But, yes, it was a scary moment, and the members obviously were shaken, and why shouldn't they be? You're handling a letter and there could be some powder in there that could affect your life.

Q: Well, I loved the ending of your quote: "But we will not be deterred from doing our job" -

A: That's correct.

Q: -- which is kind of interesting. Because people see the postman or woman every day and, if you read some of the history, of course, you know some of the tremendous physical, weather and environmental obstacles that letter carriers faced. But this was a moment in time when suddenly, everyone's focused on the letter carriers, realizing, I think, that the letter carriers are the buffer between the anthrax, whoever put it in the envelope, and us. Besides visiting Letter Carriers, did you have to take other steps with your members?

A: Yeah, I spoke, you know. Listen, you can't live in fear. You can't -- every time you pick up a letter, you can't think that this is going to poison you and you're dead. You have to go on; we have to ensure that the postal service, through its efforts, will make the environment as safe as humanly possible, but you can't be fearful. You have to just do your job, that's all. You can't say: "I'm not going to work today, and I'm going to stay home, and you're going to have to pay me because I'm

afraid there might be anthrax in the mail." No, you can't do that. So, that's what I would talk about. When I went to the stations, I would say: "Listen, I'm here. I'm not running away, you know; I face, I think about my mortality just the way you do, but, you know, listen: we cannot live in fear."

Q: I'll continue. Along the political line too, one of the things I'd hope you would discuss for the record is your work with the Hatch Act. Mo Biller, and then you and Kenneth Blaylock, were accused of violating the Hatch Act. And, you were instrumental in getting it reformed in 1993.

A: Yes.

Q: If you could maybe talk about that situation?

A: Well, see, there's an example of what I was talking about; like, when Joe Vacca became the president, his statement was he was going to get the Hatch Act repealed. Now, we had been working on trying to repeal the Hatch Act for well over 20 years, well over 20 years. It was a difficult obstacle. See, that's why I say -- he bites off something that he couldn't produce. If he had a real understanding of the dynamics, he would have never made that a key issue that he was going to reach. When I was first elected, I said at my inauguration, if you call it that, installation, that one thing I was going to do is get the people that didn't get paid, all those 60 or 70 or 80,000 carriers that didn't get paid for time that they spent on

the clock that they should've been paid for while others did -- I was going to get them all paid. I won't rest until I get everyone, and I did. I accomplished that. It cost the postal service \$45,000,000 to pay them off, but we got 'em paid. See, that's something I knew I could achieve. It just took time. It's like banging away, you know, with a hammer, on a wall; you're going to knock it down sooner or later. I knew I could achieve that. The Hatch Act was a different story. The Hatch Act is something that you've got to go through the political process to achieve. Now, we did, all of us did, all of us played our role in that. Predecessors -- they all played their role, and, so, I guess, when we were successful, it's a culmination of all of us working for years. Now, why did we get -- I hesitate to use the word "indicted" I don't think we were indicted -- we were charged for violation of the Hatch Act -- Kenny Blaylock, Moe Biller, and myself. I had nominated Fritz Mondale for president at the convention in Miami, and that's a direct violation, so I didn't care about that. (pause) So, what did they do? They said they charged us under a Hatch Act violation. So what did we get? A two week suspension, they said, which -- we never served anything; we never did anything. I mean, they just said -- I guess it goes on your record that you violated the Hatch Act. And now, with President Clinton, who was the one that said -- that signed the legislation that

discontinued the Hatch Act and gave political freedom to all of the carriers. When he was in New York, and he was first nominated for President on a Democratic ticket, I visited him in his suite. I talked to him, and we made a contribution to his campaign, and you'll recognize Rahm Emmanuel, who's now running the Democratic National Committee; he's running that operation. Rahm Emmanuel was doing the finance for Clinton, and I gave him an envelope for the President, a substantial amount for his campaign, and Bill Clinton said to me, "If the Hatch Act gets to my desk," he said, "I will sign it;" 'cause Bush, you know, he vetoed it -- Bush I -- he vetoed it. I said: "Now, remember, I didn't ask you for that; you volunteered. You still owe me," I said. He's a brilliant man, President Clinton. It's just that he had -- it's kind of funny how everyone has their faults, silly. I mean, he could have been such a plus to this nation. All right, go ahead, what else to you have?

Q: I think history will treat Bill Clinton pretty well.

Well, the Hatch Act. I am interested in your perspective on that.

A: Well, that's important, not to me personally as a [union] president of a union, but it's important to the members, and it's important -- well, I shouldn't -- let me back up. It is important to me and was as a president 'cause it could get me to focus on organizing our members into a political force. Bill

Young has done a terrific job following up on what we started. And now he's got 125,000 activists on emails and ready to send in messages, you know, to their elected representatives; all of those things are critical. They were able to get Kit Bond from Missouri to back-off from stopping postal reorganization legislation coming up by just doing that, by focusing on him and all of his constituents. He backed away real quick when he saw the power of individuals massed together, so that was important for that aspect. If you're going to be political, you might as well have the opportunity to be, because up until then, we really couldn't be involved in the political process.

Q: Well, along the same vein, speaking about politics, maybe I can. As you well know, we had a split in the American Labor Movement this past summer. We now have two labor federations --

A: No we don't.

Q: Well, depending on which side one is on -- change to win versus AFL-CIO. I'd like your perspective on a core issue: putting more money into organizing vs. more money into politics. Do you have an opinion on that?

A: Yeah. (pause) You won't be able to organize until you get involved in the politics because of the ways the laws are structured, it's difficult to organize. They [the laws] work against you. The only way to be able to be on a level playing field -- you have to change the laws; that's politics. So, you

can't do one without the other. Now what you'll ever be able to achieve on the political end of it, that's a separate question, but just on the question of how do you solve this problem, you can't solve it without solving the political, so I think that it's all a ruse. Talking about one [federation] is for politics and the other is for organizing; that's nonsense.

Q: What is your opinion about the split this past summer?

A: Well, what could be really different? I mean, think about it? What kind of an agenda can you have? First of all, they're not a structured organization, the Change to Win; I mean, they don't have an official membership, they don't have offices or staff that are running for that group. The AFL-CIO does -- it's a standing organization that has a structure. The other is just a conglomeration of five unions that are using their influence or their muscle, more or less, in terms of their ability to pay per capita tax, to try to get their way in the direction that the AFL-CIO goes in. I mean, that's all it comes down to. What are they saying, spend more money on organizing? They went through that. They said 33% of all your money has to be for organizing. You can't organize under these conditions. I mean, what are you going to organize? First of all, you don't have plants like you used to have, like, in Flint, Michigan, where you got an auto plant where you got 4,000 people working in there or 5,000 people working somewhere. You don't have those

anymore. Everything is so separated, that if you can get, like, a General Electric plant in Schenectady, where you have 8,000 people working, well, you're organizing that plant by the plant gate, you know, and you're standing there with your lunch pail, and you're organizing. That's not the way you organize today. Today, it's like a business almost. You're always going for small groups of people. I mean, you don't have large quantities of people in one established industry in one location like it used to be. Those days are over, so you got to organize wherever you get a chance. They're organizing everything. SEIU organizes everybody. Now they say that's a good, that was a brilliant idea, because you can get a lot of nurses in one hospital, you know what I'm saying. So, they don't organize that way. They organize in California an existing group of people: 60,000 people. You don't organize 60,000 people with the traditional way -- here's your showing of interest cards and having an election. You do it because there's an existing form of organization, whatever it is, and they come aboard. They merge into you. That's why SEIU grew, by just mergers. That's all, and they're still trying. Now, Unite and Here merged together. I don't understand what the significance of that is -- they're two separate industries -- but both of the presidents have agendas. So, when you're in that position, you wonder what are we trying to do? What is the idea? Not that I'm saying

that they don't want to do the right thing, but how are you going to achieve them? Unless you can get a meeting of the minds. You can't fight corporate America -- you can't fight it. If you're all together and you've pooled all your resources, you won't be able to fight them. How are you going to fight it when you're divided up the way we seem to be?

Q: That's -- that is one of the questions for the future.

A: (overlapping) I don't -- I don't know. That's why I say the labor movement is in a bad time and, you know, ambition -- there's nothing wrong with ambition. I mean, if you don't have ambition... The whole rebellion against Lane Kirkland, to me, was a thing that was dooming the labor movement. First of all, if you pooled all of the brains of all of those guys together, they couldn't even be a pimple on his brain. I mean, Lane Kirkland was a brilliant man. Yet these guys, they don't see it. I mean, like I've been talking -- I had a discussion with him, we talked about -- I said: "You're not going to be able to organize here in this country because the jobs are going to go away. These companies are going to look for cheaper labor markets, and they're going to find them. So, the only way you can be successful is you've got to organize all the workers all over the world. If you had a strong, powerful, international labor federation that could organize workers everywhere so then they couldn't be running off to India to take jobs out of America

because the workers in India would be making a fair wage and having fair benefits. But, you can't do that unless you find the formula to do it. He [Kirkland] was fighting for that. I mean, he believed in it. Meany was against being in the ICTFU. When he became the president, he [Kirkland] went into the ICTFU, and he was as anti-Communist as anybody I ever knew. I mean, I'm talking about Lane --

Q: Lane Kirkland.

A: -- and yet, he went there because, if you're going to stop this erosion of jobs in America, you've got to worry about the people that are going to take their jobs, and where are they coming from, and what is their labor cost to the people that are using them? So I think what's happening in the labor movement today is disgraceful. It really is. It is, and it doesn't all bode well for the future of the labor movement. Now, the only thing that can help us is that the corporate America gets so full of itself that it really screws up. I mean, if we can't have a revolution -- I don't mean that, and actually -- with the gas prices today, I don't know what the citizens of this country need to get upset.

Q: And I know from reading a bit about your background that you were and are, very supportive of international labor movements. I also know you were on the board of the union --

(persistent beeping noise begins) (pause) Excuse me. What that is telling me is I better --

A: Your battery's --

Q: Yeah. I thought I put --

A: (overlapping) Do you see an outlet?

Q: -- fresh batteries in this.

Q: We were talking, before we had to stop for batteries for the machine, about your international interests and concerns, I know you were on the board of the Union Network International, which is an international union communication network. I wonder if you could speak a little bit about that; if you were active in its formation or --

A: No, I actually wasn't active in its formation, but I believe that communication with unions -- you can always learn from each other, and we interacted with our secretariats in Europe, in Japan, and wherever. I went to mainland China to see their unions -- you know, they're sham unions, but they call 'em unions, so there's some structure that they have there -- just to find out how other people function in a union environment and to communicate how we can help one another.

Q: What I'd really like to sort of end with is you've been involved in civic affairs as well: The food drive, of course, which is occurring in a couple of days. But, if someone were to ask you how you want to be remembered, what kind of union leader

were you? What would you say you'd like people to think about your tenure as president of the Letter Carriers?

A: Well, I don't -- they have to make up their own decision as to what they think about what I was able to achieve or not achieve. I'm satisfied myself with how the members felt -- feel -- about me. The fact is that I still meet people that talk to me about my tenure as president in a favorable way, so that makes me happy. I did the best I could, let me put it that way. I didn't graduate from Harvard and I didn't go to Princeton -- although I had a chance to -- but I did whatever I could do to the best of my ability, and I think, over the long term, by any standard, the members of the union really benefitted by my stewardship during that period. When I say my stewardship, I'm quick to add that anything that we achieved or I achieved had is only because of the tremendous support I had from the membership all the years. I had support in everything that I did; they went along with it. They gave me the resources, they gave me the encouragement, they did everything that was humanly possible to help me, and so any successes, if there are successes, and I think really should be looked at as successes of the membership because they have been enormous in terms of their support for me.

Q: What kind of groundwork do you think you laid for the current president, Bill Young -- or other presidents down the line?

A: Well, Bill is you know, people thought I was never going to retire because you always get that -- nobody can replace you. I know better than that, so I had to wait for my spot. I had to get somebody that I could have faith they would carry on, and do the job, who was dedicated to doing a job for the members. I had no doubt about Bill, none whatsoever. None whatsoever. He's proven that support and enthusiasm for him was well-founded because he's doing a terrific job. I take no credit for that. He's gracious enough to always say he learned this from me, he learned that from me -- you learn what you learn because you have the tools to learn. So, he's doing a job that is a difficult one in a difficult time, but he's really rallied the members around him, and they're supporting him, and that's -- you know, when I left, I said, "He's going to be successful, and you'll even forget me," I said, "but give him the same kind of support that you gave me, and then there's no question about going forward."

Q: Is there any question I haven't asked, or topic you'd like to get on the record before we wrap up? Is there anything I've missed?

A: You look at this union and its history -- it's a remarkable union. It's older than most of the major unions you talk about or even thought about while this union was functioning under circumstances that were unbelievably harsh. I mean, 60 people got together from the Grand Army of the Republic and met in Milwaukee, and they started, they said: "Let's start a union" under conditions where you couldn't even petition to Congress, where you were isolated, and, yet, they were able to put something together and to sustain it, and 117 years later, here we are, still the same union with the same logo that we had, with the same name that we started with, and still representing the letter carriers, who I might add, are one of the most positive things that the American public sees, in terms of their everyday life. When you think about it, a letter carrier is in every city, in every suburb, in every part of this country on a daily basis. There's a positive sign to them; there's always something good about that. For instance, you know advertisers that use positive images to sell products invariably use the letter carrier in some form of another. You see hundreds and hundreds of ads -- you know, television ads -- that show a letter carrier. They only do that because it brings a positive spin to the product that they're selling. Now, I always was confused about why letter carriers could be somewhat more positive than firefighters or policemen. Well, there's two

reasons, you know, when you analyze it. A firefighter -- the only time you see him is when your house is on fire. I mean, it's always a tragedy. With a policeman, it's the same thing, it's always when something drastic has happened, something terrible has happened, and they show up, but there's always an attachment of something violent or something tragic that's happened. A Letter carrier just comes along, and does the job. He says hello, and he interacts with the population that he serves, and it's a relationship. It's a relationship that very few crafts, very few people have with the public that's a positive thing. Here's a union that's represented these men and women all these years, and it's still around, and it's still struggling, and it's still trying to do whatever it can do for its members to make it more of a pleasant and productive lifestyle for them, and to make our country stronger, because they make our country stronger. Letter carriers make our nation stronger.

Q: It's a massive job when you think about it --

A: Oh yeah.

Q: -- that we can actually get mail across country within two or three days, in our mailbox at our house, and we don't have to lift a finger.

A: Yeah.

Q: It's pretty amazing. Do you miss the old days of walking around delivering mail?

A: Yeah. I enjoyed it, but I didn't deliver that way. See, I delivered in businesses. I delivered in business buildings. I went from one office to another and delivered -- and I'll tell you a story.

A: Here I was elected president of Branch 36, and I took in January of 1971, so I had to stop delivering mail on my route, and I did. I was president here for eight years, and then I got elected to the national presidency. OK. So, while I was national president, I thought it would be nice for me to go back to carrying mail, back into my old station, say hello to my buddies. They had said: "You'll forget us," and all that, and OK, so, I asked the postal service to send me back to work for a couple weeks in Grand Central Station. So I went to work, and I went on my old route and carried the mail. I got to an office - - Heckscher Foundation, 2005 in 52 Vanderbilt Avenue -- I walk in, I put the mail down on the receptionist's desk. "Good morning," I said. "Hey," she said, "where have you been? I haven't seen you in a while." I haven't been here in eight years and she said, "where've you been? I haven't seen you in a while." (laughter) Well, that's kind of funny. I always thought that was hysterical.

Q: Well, you made an impression.

A: (laughter) I guess so. Notwithstanding the fact that I was one of those guys who would come in, you drop the mail, and run out. You say, "Good morning," drop the mail, and go out. Maybe that's the impression I made.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add for this oral history?

A: Just that I'm so pleased and proud and privileged to represent letter carriers; both here in New York and on the national level for the 32 years that I did. This is a great country because of people like letter carriers. I don't put them above anybody else, don't get me wrong I just happen to be from that group, and so I have a fondness for them, but we're no better or no worse than any other Americans. This is a great nation because of people like that. They're the people that come to work, they serve the American public, they pay their taxes, they send their children and themselves to war when it has to happen, they're the ones that suffer the consequences. They have no silver spoons to eat their breakfast with, and they have no luxurious suites to lay down in or beds to lay down in when they finish the day, but they're what makes America great. Not all the politicians, not all the wealthy people. I had an opportunity to work with, work for, and serve them because

that's the pleasure that I had out of being a president of a union like this, of the National Association of Letter Carriers.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: Well, OK, Mike.