

County workers upset by slow negotiations

by Caroline Porter

County employees who voted in May 2000 to be a part of the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees Union (AFSCME) are frustrated there is still not a contract agreement between them and Knox County. Employees of six offices voted to join the union: County Clerk; Treasurer; Public Defender; Assessor; Recorder and Zoning. Courthouse Security Employees voted at the same time and had a contract by December of last year. They were included in the current AFSCME contract with the Sheriff's department.

The only courthouse offices who did not join are that of the State's Attorney and Circuit Clerk. The Circuit Clerk's office rejected the offer by a margin of one vote. Negotiations for the others began in August of last year.

Members of the county negotiating committee are the six office heads and County Board representative Lomac Payton. The attorney for the county in union negotiations is Bruce Beal of Canton, who has represented the county for many years. The office heads are both elected and appointed. They are Sally Blodgett, County Clerk; Carolyn Griffith, Treasurer; Nancy McCune, Recorder; Joyce Skinner, Assessor; Jim Harrell, Public Defender and Bob Masterson, Zoning Administrator. AFSCME is represented by Ann Maring, staff representative from Springfield and long-involved in Knox County AFSCME union activities, and others.

Judy Johnson of the Public Defender's office and Treasurer employee Robin Davis are outspoken supporters of the union organization. They refer to the existing AFSCME contracts with the Sheriff's department and county nursing home employees. "We aren't asking for anything that other county employees don't have or haven't had," said Davis. "We don't think some of them (the county committee) are looking at issues but instead taking this personally."

According to Johnson, a federal mediator is now involved because employees felt the county committee was not bargaining in good faith and had stopped negotiating. One critical issue with both women and even some members of the county committee itself is the make-up of the committee. "Other counties have County Board committees negotiate for them, not the bosses of the offices," said Johnson. County Clerk Sally Blodgett confirms this. "I've called other counties and none have officials on the negotiating team," said Blodgett. "They're too close to the personnel and the situation." She said other counties have appointed a special County Board committee or used the Executive or Finance committees as the negotiating team.

Blodgett cited the examples of the Highway, Nursing Home and Jail and Sheriff's committees serving as negotiating teams in the past. Blodgett has shown her support of the union's frustration by standing with picketing AFSCME members at the courthouse before County Board meetings.

Zoning Administrator Bob Masterson said, "I questioned from the beginning why department heads were on the committee. I was surprised to be appointed. Even Bruce Beal says it's unusual." Masterson said the new county administrator, Allen Hallberg, ought to be involved.

Masterson continued, "The frustration of the employees and AFSCME is shared by management. I don't know what's normal. Both sides would like to reach an agreement and speed things along. But when the union was voted in we started with a clean slate. The offices now have different personnel policies. Some have never followed the county personnel policy, for example, on sick days, personal days, bonuses. Now we are starting from scratch and everything has to be uniform. Some employees will lose and some will gain. The purpose of the union is to have a level playing field."

"I don't agree that we're not negotiating in good faith," added Masterson, "but we should do what's right for the

employees. We (the offices) should follow common rules and procedures. That's why this movement started in the first place. Employees talk to each other and found they weren't getting the same treatment."

Ann Maring, AFSCME negotiator, said "It's not uncommon to take well over a year for the first contract." She said attorney Bruce Beal had been ill during the winter and some meetings were cancelled because of bad weather. "We just want these people treated fairly," she said. "If the language is good enough for the Sheriff's department and the nursing home, it ought to be good enough for the courthouse employees."

Maring said that AFSCME members have been picketing and rallying on the steps of the courthouse before County Board meetings to put pressure on the county officials and said, "that's about the only leverage we have."

Robert Lynch, AFSCME Deputy Director in Chicago, agreed. She said the union here is following a set of tactics. "In most cases it's just a matter of keeping the pressure on. The first contract is usually difficult but we certainly think the county board is being unreasonable. It's pretty rare to change the content of a bargaining committee but someone can be added. One person can hold up a process."

Union representatives have tried to express their frustration directly to the County Board but have been thwarted by County Board Chair Sally Keener and the board members themselves. In March, board members voted not to let them speak. Among those voting against their expression was Lomac Payton, D-3, a member of the county negotiating team. Asked why he voted that way, he responded, "I have no comment on that. I don't want to jeopardize the work we're doing."

"We are going in the right direction and making progress. I expect we will have a contract before the end of the year. It takes time. I didn't realize it until we got started," said Payton.

He believes the committee make-up is good the way it is. "As far as the other contracts we (the county) have, these unions have been established for years, some over 20 years. They've had years to make compromises and work things out and don't have much to do with this new union contract. They've gotten to the point where it takes hardly any time to re-negotiate their contracts. I've talked to other counties; they say some have taken two to three years to reach a new union contract agreement."

Carolyn Griffith, County Treasurer, declined to comment on the union negotiations.

AFSCME, Robin Davis and Tracy Bailey, both with the Treasurer's office for over eight years, have filed two Unfair Labor Practice complaints against Griffith and the Knox County Board with the Illinois Labor Relations Board. They cite verbal coercion and intimidation by Griffith because of their union support, and trying to change salary and hour agreements. Davis says no hearings have yet been held. The County Board chairman and Griffith have been notified of the complaints.

Allen Hallberg, Knox County's first county administrator who started his job June 1st, said, "At the present time I'm not going to be part of the negotiating committee. Board members and chairman Sally Keener have suggested negotiations are too far into the process for me to be a part of it. Another reason is that the new the personnel policy, which goes into effect August 1st, states that I would act as a third party in a dispute between a supervisor and an employee. It may not be the best for me to play both roles. But, if the board changes its consensus, I'll be on the committee."

The next negotiating meeting is scheduled for June 27th at the courthouse at 5 pm.