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AFGE STRUGGLE AT THE DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

Sarah Harper is a chief steward for American Federation of Government Employees, Local 12 in Washington DC. She represents 200 clerical workers and attorneys in the Administrative Law Judges and Benefits Review Board (ALJ) Section of the Office of the Secretary, U.S. Department of Labor. LCR interviewed Ms. Harper to gain insight about union struggles around the firings created by the Reagan administration's budget cuts.

LCR: You've been a DOL employee and AFGE member for over eleven years. What significant changes in the government's bargaining strategies have you witnessed?

SH: During the Carter administration the Civil Service Reform Act was passed. It did not go into effect, however, until 1981. Then it reduced the number of days for a notice of firing from 90 days to 30 and made important changes in performance evaluations.

The act required evaluations to include critical and non-critical job elements and new standards. The stated goal was to make evaluations less subjective. But what constituted critical elements (duties critical to efficiency in a particular position) was left to the discretion of managers as was the last word on standards. Employees were required to sign evaluations for the first time.

LCR: In what way were employees affected as a consequence of this Act?

SH: The appraisal system is the biggest source of grievances. Within-grade increases and RIFs (reductions in force, e.g. job cuts) depend heavily on this system. Many evaluations are viewed by employees as unfair and many are not received on time for upgrades.

But, more importantly, those workers with ratings below "outstanding" or "highly effective" don't stand a chance. They won't get a within-grade increase. What's more, when budget cuts occur in their section they receive RIF standing and can forget about finding a job elsewhere in the department. When budget cuts are going on, good evaluations are at a premium.

LCR: Is it possible for an employee to appeal a bad decision?

SH: Yes. The Federal Labor Regulatory Authority has taken appeal jurisdiction away from the Civil Service Commission. However, easily two-thirds of the cases have been decided in management's favor.

LCR: How would you summarize where things stand under the present administration?

SH: Well, the RIFs mentioned began in 1982. There was a ten percent across-the-board budget cut (in all departments). Several thousand workers lost jobs. Job Corps was cut drastically, and WIN (Work Incentive Program) was discontinued. The administration did set up something called the Job Training Partnership Act. Its success, however, depends on businesses creating jobs. That hasn't happened.

This year there will be no cost of living increase and some jobs may depend on what happens in the furor surrounding Gramm-Rudman. Supposedly, there won't be any RIFs in the first round of cuts. Travel and other perks will be cut first. But, management hasn't shared those plans with us yet; nor has anything been said about the '87 budget which starts October 1.

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LCR: *How would you describe the general mood of the membership of Local 12 today?*

SH: There are many people who are angry and many who are suffering low morale. Low morale can make people give up. But I've found many people coming out to get involved who previously seemed unwilling to challenge the system.

LCR: *How has the union leadership responded to the layoffs?*

SH: The present local president is very committed to legal methods. The executive committee hired a paid lobbyist last year to lobby on Capitol Hill over the 1986 budget.

LCR: *I know its illegal for AFGE workers to strike. Would the leadership support a job action?*

SH: They don't believe the members can be that militant. Only when the rank and file really pressure the officers do they agree to force an issue. For example, the ETA (Employment and Training Administration) workers organized a very successful soup kitchen for laid off workers and a rally against RIFs last winter. Only after their efforts gained a lot of popular attention did the union support the project.

LCR: *Has it always been this way?*

SH: The previous president sounded very militant and did attempt a minor action. Unfortunately, he would back down when the time came to be most firm. In the middle of a union struggle to get a racist supervisor fired, I was taken off the case. I felt then and I still feel that it was a mistake. Statistics show that black women and older workers suffer more firings than any other groups. We should have taken this opportunity to bring that out into the open.

LCR: *You've run for Local 12 president in the past. Would you describe your candidacy and the elections?*

SH: I ran for president three times-1978, '79 and 80. In 1978, I was elected to the Executive Board by write-in votes. Each time I ran on an INCAR (International Committee Against Racism) platform. INCAR is an anti-racist, anti-sexist, activist group I belong to. We were demanding six hours work for eight hours pay, the firing of all racist and/or sexist supervisors, a \$1500 across the board wage increase, and a strike preparation committee.

LCR: *How did the membership receive these demands?*

SH: Most workers heard about me during our lunchtime rallies and leafletting. People liked the idea of a strike preparation committee very much. It was passed by vote at a local meeting, but received a negative ruling from the National. The three page memo we received said the National did not wish to impose the horrors of a strike on its membership; they believed a strike preparation committee was ambiguous legally; and it didn't matter because they had negotiated for a seven percent pay increase in the next budget.

LCR: *How did the members feel about the other issues you campaigned for?*

SH: Many clericals were for the wage increase and (supervisor) firings. How these could be carried out was the main question. They were also in favor of 6 for 8. Again, how to obtain our goal was a major issue.

LCR: *Did you have an answer?*

SH: Strong rank and file leadership is essential and joining INCAR would help. Some of the members have taken militant action with INCAR help. In 1980 INCAR members from DOL went to the pickets held by PATCO workers. We also attended an AFGE District Council Meeting to ask the Council to support PATCO. The head council said, "Oh, the members aren't ready for that yet."

LCR: *Now you seem to spend most of your union time on grievances. What kind of grievances do you handle?*

SH: I get firings.

-- Lisa Saunders

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