

CWA - Cingular Contract Negotiations Begin This Week –
An Interview with Holly Sorey
Tuesday, January 04, 2005

CWA - Cingular contract negotiations begin this week.

An interview with bargaining committee member Holly Sorey...

Q: Holly, what's your job at Cingular?

A: I'm a CSR II, (switch) at the Rantoul Call Center Illinois. I take inbound calls from CSR's or Sales Agents having problems with phones not working. It may be the network or an equipment problem or an outage. I can determine that for them through troubleshooting and checking the applications we have available, if it can't be determined, I fill out a trouble ticket and send it to an engineer, if needed.

Q: How many work in your call center?

A: There are about 600 of us. The company will be hiring in January because our call volume is projected to go up. But it's a moving target - our attrition is high because of lack of opportunity, and on top of that the company continues to contract out work. We're looking to have several of these issues resolved in this contract.

Q: How long have you worked at Cingular?

A: I've been at this call center 9 years in April. I started here with Ameritech and I was here when it became Cingular. I became a steward from day one and now I'm president of CWA Local 4202.

Q: What are the big issues facing Cingular CSR's in this contract negotiations?

A: The two big issues - pay increases and job security - are the same for all groups, whether call center, techs or retail sales. I'm a good example of the pay issue: I'm at \$16.36 and I received a 6 cents raise last year. I didn't receive the lump sum because my raise was not less than 5 cents. Most of us at the call center believe our pay is below that of ATT Wireless employees and certainly below Verizon Wireless and we need to address that in this contract.

Q: What's the job security issue?

A: It has to do with two things - contracting out and the integration of ATT Wireless. We say the contracting out has got to stop, there's no place for it in this company. Here's an example. In September Cingular began contracting our prepaid calls to West Inc. in Youngstown OH. At the same time we know of Cingular call centers in Illinois with periods of 30 percent idle time, and at the same time we have all the ATT Wireless call centers coming on line. How does this all add up? We know there is too much capacity when you put ATT Wireless together with Cingular - that's bad enough - but then you also contract out work to third parties. We want that Youngstown prepaid work brought back into our call centers. That's our work and part of our job security for the future.

Q: Company management has said there will not be layoffs or closing of Cingular call centers due to the merger. Are employees reassured by that?

A: In a way we are. Of course we appreciate management's good intentions to make this merger work well for all of us. That's important. On the other hand, we've seen other commitments fall through. I recall the commitment management made 2 years ago to turn our center into a Tier 2 Tech Center where we'd all be at CSRII level doing tech work. We had a big kickoff meeting and began training every employee in our new duties. Morale was sky-high. Then, after 75 percent of the employees were retrained and provided with materials, the plan was called off due to "needs of the business" and we're still a center where the overwhelming majority of employees are CSRI's. To be honest, that sort of thing makes us skeptical about management's follow-through on their promise of job security.

Q: Are there other concerns about the merger?

A: Yes, the influx of ATT Wireless management. We're hearing that a lot of Cingular management will be replaced by ATT management; we think they'll be a lot more hard-line, especially about things like subcontracting out work. ATT subcontracts a lot of their work out. That just makes us even more determined to get protections into our contract that will stand up, no matter who the management turns out to be.

Q: Are there particular Call Center issues you will be focusing on during the contract negotiations?

A: Well, the biggest problem we have at any Cingular call center is the high employee turnover rates - I've heard they're as high as 50 percent in some centers. That's just not acceptable and we intend to address that in this contract negotiation. Employee turnover can be caused by many things - inadequate pay, lack of opportunity for advancement, unreasonable workloads, hyper monitoring of performance, or the fact that there are better opportunities available at other companies. We suffer from all those

problems and we intend to address them in the contract. One big step will be to open up more CSR II positions and make it a career path. People are looking for opportunities to grow and develop. It would be good for the employees, for our customers and for the company.

Q: What other big issues do you think will come up in bargaining?

A: One of the things I want to see improved is grievance handling. The way it is now we very rarely settle grievances at the informal level; we may as well not have an informal level or local grievance meeting. All discipline grievances get settled, if they are going to be settled, at the director level. Local management can give out discipline, but they can't settle or reduce a grievance resulting from that discipline. It doesn't make sense. And it's not my imagination - we've heard management state at roundtable meetings that local management doesn't have the authority to settle discipline grievances - only the director level has that authority. We need to change that or else start filing every grievance with the director.

Q: How do you think management will respond in these negotiations?

A: Businesslike. That's how they were at our first introductory meeting and I expect that will be the tone of the negotiations. We outlined our issues in general terms and they took notes but didn't have much to reply. That's what I expected at the first meeting. Our CWA bargaining team is really excellent - I'm honored to be on their team and working with them. And I'm especially proud of the mobilization our members are doing to support the negotiations. I'm convinced the outcome of these negotiations will depend on the strength of our members' mobilization activities.