



Washington-Baltimore Newspaper Guild

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CNS Unit in Tough Contract Fight

The 20 Guild members at Catholic News Service are in one of the toughest contract battles they have ever experienced.

The CNS management team -- none of which has ever negotiated a collective bargaining agreement before -- is not only insisting on the vastly inflated worker share of health-care premiums all too common in contract talks today, but on the unilateral right to change or cancel pension benefits at any time during the length of the agreement.

CNS also had demanded the right to change or get rid of health insurance coverage, but recently dropped that demand.

Nearly as soon as management declared that its demand on pension coverage was "nonnegotiable," tent cards sprang up at workstations proclaiming, "Nonnegotiable? We Don't Think So!"

Talks have been so rocky that a federal mediator was called in after management reneged on a cost-of-living clause to which it had previously given its OK.

The Guild members at CNS are fighting back.

A mobilization team consisting of unit secretary Wendy Bunns, former unit chair Barb Frazee, local treasurer Mark Pattison and Charlotte Sherrod are strategizing on how to spread their message and leverage their bargaining unit's power for the contract struggle ahead.

Meanwhile, the unit's bargaining team -- unit chair (and WBNG Shop Steward of the Year winner) Cassandra Shieh, unit vice chair Jerry Filteau, Mary Esslinger, Gloria Moore and WBNG Local Representative Paul Reilly -- are sticking to the principle that no worker would ever agree to a contract that meant less for them.

"I've been in some difficult and complex negotiations before," Reilly said, "but these talks just boggle the mind. I give the CNS members a lot of credit for still producing good work for the benefit of their clients through all this. There's a lot of cohesiveness in this unit, and there's no doubt in my mind that we'll prevail. A fair and equitable contract should never be this hard to attain."

Bargaining for a contract that expired December 31st began in October.