

## **MAP leads NWCDS chapter to our first strike vote**

*By: Rick Tracy*

Northwest Central Dispatch in Arlington Heights is one of the largest, if not the largest, dispatch center in the state outside of Chicago. Currently it employs 67 Telecommunicators as well as supervisors and other staff. The 12 communities and fire districts it serves have a night time population of almost half a million.

On February 5, 2009, the Illinois Labor Relations Board certified the Telecommunicators of Northwest Central Dispatch System (NWCDS) MAP chapter #540. A couple of months later began one of the longest contract bargaining experiences MAP has ever had.

For the next two and a half years we met about 30 times at the negotiating table with very little getting done. Most of what we were trying to accomplish was getting their current benefits into the contract so they could not be eroded. The employer's position was the current benefits were too generous. The employer kept insisting on giving us "package proposals." These proposals were take all or nothing. They would have 10-15 items, of which one or two would be acceptable, but the rest were not. So we would have to reject the whole package. Meetings involving a mediator were also unproductive.

Not only were we getting nowhere at the bargaining table, but management was over time taking the "too generous" benefits away from the chapter. These changes resulted in the filing of many Unfair Labor Practice charges against NWCDS.

Unlike sworn police officers, correctional officers, and fire fighters, telecommunicators are not considered essential employees under the law and do not have interest arbitration. Their only recourse at impasse is to strike. Under the law, as long as the criteria for a strike is met and proper notice is given an employee cannot be disciplined or terminated for striking.

When it was obvious we were approaching impasse, we asked the employer several times to agree to voluntary arbitration of the remaining issues. Each time we were told NO.

Faced with more years of unproductive bargaining sessions or accepting a substandard contract, our negotiating team faced the toughest decision any MAP chapter has had; whether or not to strike.

Our team quickly determined a strike was the only recourse and jumped into action. Meetings were held with the chapter members, which resulted in commitments from all but a handful of members to strike.

On September 28, 2011, MAP issued a *Notice of Intent to Strike* to NWCDS. The law requires a five business day notice be given, so the earliest the strike could happen was October 6, 2011, at 5:00pm. This notice gave the employer a week to intimidate our members. Comments were

made by supervisors, and management started training replacement workers on the main dispatch floor even though they have dedicated training areas in the center.

Our members led by their chapter reps stayed together and strong. They were not intimidated. Management's efforts just gave them more resolve to strike. The chapter decided the strike would begin as soon as allowed: 5:00pm on October 5, 2011.

On October 4, 2011, we received the first "good" contract offer from NWCDS in two-and-a-half years. There were several encouraging items in the offer, as well as a few that were not so encouraging.

On October 5, 2011, at 2:00pm, we met with the employer and a mediator to try and work out an agreement and avoid the strike. The first thing we agreed on was the employee's offer on wages and insurance. The wage offer was an 8.5 percent increase over five years, retro'ed back to 2009. The offer was .5% less than we asked for. The remaining items were very much administrative and the employer was not budging. The strike appeared to be imminent.

At 8:00pm, a chapter meeting was held offsite to inform the membership of the strike time, details and rules. This meeting was held by the chapter president and me, and attended by about 50 members. The atmosphere was extremely positive, even members who we knew were "on the fence" were now supportive of the strike. Another meeting was scheduled for 11:30pm so the afternoon shift members could be briefed. This meeting was well attended by the afternoon shift as well as members who were at the first meeting. It was extremely clear this chapter was supportive of the strike and were walking the next day at 5:00pm.

While these meetings were taking place, the remainder of the negotiating team was still at the center with the mediator. Not much was happening until around 12:30am, which is about the time one would figure management would be getting information on how the offsite strike meetings had gone.

After two-and-a-half years and almost 12 hours with a mediator, an agreement was reached and the strike was averted. The agreement included all the previously agreed on items, status quo on benefits with the exception of seven items we could not agree on. Those items will be decided by an arbitrator. The bulk of the contract will be implemented as soon as the parties ratify it. The seven remaining items will be added once they are arbitrated. So we were able to force management to arbitration, something we asked them to do several times.

Our NWCDS chapter showed an incredible amount of courage and unity. They stayed strong and were not intimidated by the actions of management. Our chapter representatives displayed leadership we should all be very proud of. It was the strength they showed that kept the membership together and forced the employer to settle this contract.

I would also be remiss if I did not mention the support our chapter received from other union members and others. NWCDS put out a call to all its agencies looking for experienced people who could fill in “in case of an emergency.” Once we put out the word the “emergency” was actually a strike, we know of no union member from MAP or any other union who volunteered, even though it would have meant overtime pay! Most of the replacement workers who were being trained were non-union civilian employees of the departments in NWCDS. Most of them expressed their support and said they were only there because they were ordered. We even got some words of encouragement from some of the “white shirts” who were being trained.

The Arlington Heights MAP chapter leadership as well as the Arlington Heights Fire Department union leadership deserve a special thanks. They attended some of the NWCDS chapter meetings to offer assistance, support and made themselves available to the NWCDS chapter reps. They, along with Mount Prospect, Elk Grove and other union chapters, including Rolling Meadows which is not part of MAP, offered assistance, including financial support to the members if needed.

The conclusion: Our NWCDS chapter showed there is power if you stand together and stay strong. We were able to force the NWCDS management to fairly negotiate. What we could not settle on will be handled by an arbitrator—something we had been asking for all along.

The Metropolitan Alliance of Police is proud of the leadership our NWCDS chapter representatives showed along with the unity, strength and resolve shown by our members.

