

Fire Department fights strife long after strike

Continued from page one

investigated by police.

● On Oct. 10, an inspection of a South Side firehouse disclosed that the radiator of a snorkel had been punctured. On the same day, it was discovered that a battery had been removed from a new ambulance that had yet to make its first emergency run. Both incidents are blamed on the continued strike-related harassment.

● In a development that Roberts and Stensland say threatens the social fabric of the department, candidates hired during the strike are being denied the traditional camaraderie of eating with their fellow firefighters, with whom they must live in close quarters for 24-hour shifts.

The officials accuse the union of fostering the practice, now centered mainly on the South Side, and fear it could spread throughout the city. Excluding a firefighter from the so-called "cooking club" that exists in every firehouse on the basis of his position during the strike is explicitly prohibited in the union's strike-ending agreement with the city.

● Indicative of low morale, other top officials say, is the disproportionately high number of transfers requested by firemen since the strike. More than 2,200 of the department's roughly 4,100 fire fighters—about 53 per cent—have been granted transfers at their own request, and more are scheduled within the next few months. In an average year, 300 to 400 firefighters request and receive transfers.

IN A WIDE-RANGING, two-hour interview, Roberts and Stensland outlined this picture of a divided department in disarray, questioning the motives behind the continued harassment at a time when negotiations on a contract are "progressing well."

"This goes beyond getting a contract, because they're absolutely going to get a contract and they know it," said Roberts, a veteran police officer who has been elevated to No. 2 man in the Fire Department.

Leaving no doubt as to whom he blames for the department's woes, Roberts charged that the union "can stop this any time they want to."

Attempts by The Tribune to reach Frank Muscare, president of Local 2 of the Chicago Fire Fighters Union, and Don Rose, spokesman for the union, were unsuccessful.

Barbara O'Connor, an aide to Rose in press relations for the union, denied the charges of union-provoked violence and harassment, saying union members believe "they are the ones being harassed."

O'Connor said the department's administration has cracked down on union members by prohibiting long hair, strictly enforcing rules about uniforms, and "other measures that have nothing to do with fighting fires."

"It sounds trivial, but the whole social life of a firehouse revolves around the kitchen area," said Stensland. "That's where they sit, that's where they talk, that's where they spend their time together."

OTHER CASES of alleged harassment range from the trivial to the serious. In one Northwest Side firehouse, for example, a captain who did not strike complained that a dead mouse had been placed behind the headband of his helmet.

"This incident is a blatant case of harassment to which myself and others are subjected every day," the captain wrote in a formal complaint reviewed by The Tribune.

In another, more serious incident, a paramedic told of narrowly averting an auto accident when he discovered the bolts on one of his wheels had been loosened and had fallen off.

One formal complaint, confirmed by the department, told that a nonstriking firemen's car had had three tires slashed, its antenna broken, a side window smashed, its trunk lock pried open, and the side molding torn off.

Roberts said many other incidents go unreported because firefighters fear retribution from their colleagues. "Once a formal investigation is made, they often think they're going to get it worse," he said.

THE TIMING OF these incidents, in many ways, could not come at a worse time, Roberts said.

"We think we've showed good faith in our negotiations and in living up to the spirit of the agreements we've signed with them," he said, citing the record number of promotions that have been approved since the strike.

Department records show that 421 men—more than 10 per cent of the force—have been promoted over the last seven months, a major issue during the strike, when the union charged that a shortage of officers forced many firemen to work unofficially at a higher rank without receiving proper compensation.

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ONE EXAMPLE cited by O'Connor involved was the dispute over the display of flag patches on firefighters' sleeves. Thirty firemen were suspended last week for refusing to change the old American flag patch to a new patch of the City of Chicago flag, a move union officials charged was made specifically to harass them.

Roberts and Stensland denied any intention to focus on strikers, saying 27 of the 30 firemen suspended were from one South Side firehouse. The 27 were suspended, the officials said, because they refused to change their patches after being given a second opportunity to comply with the department-wide order.

In addition, Roberts said, the department "bent over backwards" to keep the issue from blowing out of proportion by giving the men 12- and 24-hour suspensions—24 hours for officers, 12 for fire fighters—when they could have received up to 30 days.

A new compromise patch displaying both flags is scheduled to be unveiled shortly. But Roberts said enforcement of the minor regulation reflects the intention of Blair, an outsider, to bring long-lacking discipline to the department he inherited three months ago.

THE BACKBONE of this effort will be the new Internal Audit Division, a beefed-up investigations unit that Blair has described as necessary because the department's existing unit is "a very token one."

The unit will "cover all kinds of investigations and all kinds of in-house investigations" on a continuing basis, Blair has said.

William Reddy, first vice president of the firefighters union, later said the union agrees with the concept of a "beefed-up" internal investigations unit as long as it doesn't selectively investigate striking fire fighters.

Roberts vowed that will not happen, though he said any striking firemen found guilty of harassment would be dismissed and prosecuted on criminal charges if possible.

ONE FIREMAN who went on strike already faces criminal charges for a series of threatening calls made to three battalion chiefs who did not participate in the strike.

The calls, made over a period of weeks from a public pay phone inside Engine 55's station, were traced last month through a joint investigation by the Fire Department, the Police Department, and Illinois Bell Telephone Co.

More recently, 29 firefighters have been questioned for their alleged involvement in denying candidates eating privileges in the firehouse, a practice Roberts said exists in 11 of 20 firehouses in the South Side's 5th District alone, but one that "will not be tolerated."

The background

THE ILL WILL that persists in the Fire Department is the result of the first firefighters strike in Chicago history, a labor dispute considered one of the bitterest the city has seen.

Before the strike ended March 8, 24 Chicagoans lost their lives in fires. Now, more than eight months later, firemen still have not obtained their main goal, a formal labor contract with the city.

Sentiment of Chicago firemen for a union contract had been building for more than a decade, but the drive did not pick up steam until Jane Byrne, then a mayoral candidate, promised collective bargaining agreements with firemen and other city employes.

LAST NOVEMBER, after Mrs. Byrne had become mayor, the executive board of Local 2 of the Chicago Fire Fighters Union approved a strike vote by members because of seemingly stalled negotiations towards a contract, and in December the firemen voted to authorize union leaders to call a strike.

Firemen walked off their jobs Feb. 14, ignoring a Circuit Court judge's back-to-work order.

Despite a \$40,000-a-day fine on the union and the eventual jailing of Frank Muscare, the fiery leader of Local 2, the strike continued, with inflamed rhetoric from both sides and reports of violence against nonstrikers and their families.

AT 1:40 A.M. March 8, the firefighters voted unanimously to go back later that day and signed a tentative agreement with the city calling for continued negotiations. The union gave up its demand for total amnesty, agreeing that every striker would lose a day's pay and striking battalion chiefs would lose four days' pay.

A supplementary agreement clarifying details of the original pact was signed by both sides in late June. Negotiations towards a formal contract began again on Nov. 7.

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