

On the Picket Line (Chicago Fire Strike)

By Richard C. Ornberg – Excerpted from his book “*10-24: A Firefighter Looks Back*”

Though I had tried to provide the most objective account of the strike I could for magazine publication, I found myself exploring my own gut each day of the strike. While I was sympathetic to union needs and demands, I could also understand and agree with a few of the city's equally stubborn attitudes. Fortunately for me, I was among those who were mostly outside observers. Unlike striking or on-duty firefighters, officers and their families, I didn't have to live and function on either side of the (descriptive word) emotional and sensitive divide that each day widened to canyon-like proportions.

Normally one of the busiest in the city of Chicago, the station housing Engine Co. 83 and Truck Co. 22 was among the quietest the day I chose to visit. One lonely duty officer offered the only sign of life inside a station that responds to 4,500 engine runs and 8,000 ambulance calls a year.

Outside, picket signs were carried by blue shirts and officers alike. Two experienced battalion chiefs shared cold weather, hot coffee, and pickets with rookie firefighters. There was a feeling of fatherly support between the old timers and the newcomers. "Everybody's out," noted Chief Jack McDonough, the 27 year veteran, who hovered over the scene as if in command of a fire. On the first day of the strike, he would detour reporters off to the side and closely monitor any and all statements made by his co-workers.

"We work together as a family, and we take care of our own. I've buried 14 personal friends already, and we're still only a number to the city," explained Chief McDonough.

The chief pointed out a tall, middle-aged firefighter standing by a fire burning in an old rusty drum. The man stood sipping coffee out of a paper cup while he surveyed the traffic passing both in the street and on the sidewalk. Battalion Chief Ray Bieschke, with 37 years on the department, was on strike with his men.

The quiet gray haired man, who everyone referred to as "The Master", briefly summed up his reasons. "We want to retain the rights that we have, and the city wants to bust up the union."

Striking firefighters marched between remote TV rigs and squad cars as passing motorists alternately honked approval or stared in disbelief at the image of firefighters on strike. The mother of a handicapped child questioned how her daughter could be assured protection in an emergency. Paramedics on the line told her they could provide service if she would bring the child to the station.

Local residents gathered and offered support to the strikers. They were eager to support any group that countered the "establishment" they blamed for their own situation. "Wino," a ratty-haired mongrel that seemed to represent the deteriorating condition of the Chicago uptown district, also accompanied the strikers. A cardboard picket sign was tied around his midsection.

Midnight on the Picket Line.

Engine Co. 11 and Truck Co. 9 sat quietly inside the station on the city's western border. Outside, five striking firefighters huddled around a fire, shifting their weight from one foot to another. Two inches of snow had fallen since 9 P.M. when four more officers left their stations within the 6th Division to join the strikers. Only one captain and three lieutenants remained inside the station, removed from the falling snow and increasing resentment outside.

In reference to a non-striker, one firefighter muttered, "I may be the cook, but I'll be damned if I'll ever cook for that S.O.B. ever again."

Inside another station, a deputy marshal lashed out at the strikers outside his station: "We've got enough men to handle the job. We're the real firemen inside the station. Those guys out picketing aren't firemen anymore."

"The problem is that we've got a mayor that doesn't care," said Mike Mahoney, a nine-year veteran firefighter and union steward, assigned to the station housing Ladder Co. 35 and Engine Co. 76. "We've got guys here on the line that really care. If the city is gonna set up all the rules, what good is there to sit down and talk?" Thirteen days into the strike, Mahoney speculated on the vote that led to the action. "If they held another strike vote in the future, it would never be passed. When we took the vote, we didn't think she [Byrne] would be that crazy and not negotiate."

Mahoney's family was affected by the strike, as were the families of all the strikers. "I have children in the parochial school" explained Mike's wife Mary Ann.

"There were five in the religion class who were asked if their daddies were firefighters. They said 'yes' and were asked if they were on strike. They said 'yes.' The teacher proceeded to tell them that their fathers were murderers, sinners, and bad people."

Threats were even made to some of the families of non-striking firefighters. The union continually denied that they would condone any such tactics and offered protection: "If we can help in any way, we will," remarked one strike chairman on a local radio talk show. "We don't want anybody hurt. We are offering protection to any wife of a non-striker who asks. We have firefighters right here that will sit in their homes, or outside to see that nothing happens. No damage, no bodily harm."

For some strikers, information came only from the radio talk shows that periodically motivated cheers or obscenities from their listeners as city officials spoke, citizens offered opinions, or news commentators shared their own philosophies. As they listened, the picketers' expressions ranged from angry and defiant to frustrated and bewildered.

On one morning talk show, the pro-city host was demonizing those firefighters who had walked out and accepting mostly calls from those who agreed with him. One caller, however, had made it past the call screener and asked if he could read a short piece called "I am a Firefighter" on the air. I was listening that morning at home, while having a cup of coffee in my kitchen. Hearing the title, I thought, "That's pretty interesting. That's the title of a piece I did a year or so ago in the local paper." A week or so earlier I had provided a copy of it to one of the CFD union leaders to pass on or use as needed, then forgot about it. Once the reader began to recite it, I knew the piece was mine.

"I am a firefighter!

I have entered literally hundreds of homes in this city, homes full of fire, heat and smoke, in order that lives and property may be saved.

I have seen our citizens in a myriad of indescribable states. I see the deformed and the crippled. I remove the dead parents and grandparents. I carry away the dead and dying infants.

I have cried uncontrollably when I came home.

Citizens vomit into my mouth as I try to breathe life into their bodies; I spit it out and continue my efforts.

I face temperatures that can melt the earwax in my head and burn my skin to blisters that I won't notice until I return to the station. I am overcome by smoke, heat exhaustion and injured while protecting others.

I willingly give up my Christmas Day at home with my children and eat Thanksgiving dinner with five or six firemen instead of my family. I spend each national holiday at the firehouse or on the street responding to fireworks injuries, sick overeaters and drunken fatal accidents that occur after somebody else's party.

I take special care at 3 o'clock in the morning not to use blaring horns or sirens so as to not disturb your sleep.

I know that chances are, I will have a less than 50 percent chance of surviving the year without some form of duty injury. I know that my profession will claim the lives of more fellow workers than any other occupation in the nation.

I concern myself with my pension, so that my wife and children will be provided for should I be crippled or killed protecting your property.

I maintain a personal dedication and pride in my profession, regardless of problems of internal administration.

Every two weeks, I show up for my paycheck, and I believe I have earned every damn cent."

The union version the caller read, of course, had an additional line or two calling for union solidarity or some similar message. The radio host was uncharacteristically silent for a short while, then spoke again in a soft tone.

"OK, OK," he said quietly. "You've made a point, and we're not disputing the service that firemen provide. Maybe we all need to hear stuff like that more often. I don't know." After a short feel-good interlude that lasted about five or ten minutes, the opinionated calls and anti-strike vitriol resumed.

Constant bombardment by rumors, press questioning, and soul-searching had its effect on strikers, but the feeling of solidarity strengthened them. Most reflected on relationships, nurtured by years of living and fighting fires together, that had been possibly irreparably shattered by the strike. One seven-year veteran firefighter, grabbing the sign that was hung over his torso with a heavy length of twine, summed it up this way.

"When I first saw this sign, I got a sick feeling in my stomach; When I put it on, I was scared to death." He dropped the sign against his chest and looked away.

"Now that I'm wearing it, I feel like I just fell off a high cliff and I'm waiting to hit."

XXX