

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

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It is evident that the labor movement is making strides in the interpreting community. The Interpreters' Chapter of Local 1070/District Council 37/AFSCME, the collective bargaining body of New York State court interpreters, had the opportunity to offer a presentation at the 2003 NAJIT conference in Nashville. Court interpreters in California, Illinois (Cook County) and Hawaii are just the latest in a growing trend toward joining unions. New York state has a long-standing working relationship with labor unions and the New York court interpreters have been part of this concept since the 1980's.

Needless to say, there still are conflicting views on joining labor unions. California interpreters recently went through a painful and divisive process as interpreters in the Bay Area voted to join a collective bargaining unit despite disapproval of the California Court Interpreters Association (CCIA). I withhold an opinion on the issues that divide the California interpreters. Nonetheless, I would like to impart my opinion as to the advantages of collective bargaining.

The most evident advantage of joining a labor union is the immediate availability of resources such as legal representation, professional bargaining, political influence, and the provision of fringe benefits. The complex structure of government agencies makes it desirable to draw up contracts that stipulate terms of employment and also delineate the manner in which disciplinary actions are to be handled. Professional contract negotiators can ensure interpreters a competitive salary, just compensation for overtime work, non-preferential employment, health benefits and job security. Affiliations with large labor unions may also offer benefits in addition to the ones obtained through the employer, such as dental, optical or legal representation for individual members and their families.

Since the 1970's, New York City court interpreters have been affiliated with District Council 37(DC 37), the city's largest public employees labor union. DC 37 oversees smaller units called locals; these locals are further divided into units called chapters. Local 1070/Court Interpreters' Chapter is a group of about 300 full time staff interpreters as well as per diem interpreters in a variety of languages. Since unionizing, court interpreters have secured contracts that periodically increase their income. The New York court system utilizes an employee grading scheme to classify its employees. In the 1980's interpreters had a paygrade of JG-16 with an annual salary of \$12,000 plus benefits. Today court interpreters have a starting annual sal-

ary of \$39,642 plus location pay to offset the high cost of city living as well as an overtime pay schedule. The contract also ensures a \$1,500 yearly increment for the first seven years of employment. Other benefits include annual leave (20 days per year), sick leave, and a sick leave bank that enables employees to endure financially any protracted medical problems. Fringe benefits also include legal representation when facing disciplinary action as well as counsel for divorce proceedings, real estate purchase, will preparation and other non-criminal proceedings. A dental and optical plan is available for members and their families. All members are entitled to a cash refund upon successful completion of college or continuing education courses. Discounts and promotions from car rental companies, hotels, banks and other industries are available for interpreters who are members of our local.

Court interpreting is a relatively new profession in the American courts and understandably, administrators have limited insight regarding this discipline. But court interpreters are becoming more commonplace in the American legal landscape. Deemed by some the stepchild of the justice system, court interpreters can be likened to the celebrated Cinderella. A labor union

is capable of providing assistance to court administrators to successfully staff their courts with highly skilled interpreters. Interpreters grouped in organizations such as labor unions can impart valuable experience and knowledge that can be implemented for optimal service. In New York, the Interpreters Chapter has periodically offered workshops in grammar, phonetics, vocabulary and procedure in criminal, family, civil and housing court. The relationship between administration and a labor union need not be adversarial; rather, this liaison can work together to ensure safe and just working conditions and also strive for the courts to get the best linguistic service that money can buy. ▲

[The author is a staff Spanish court interpreter with New York State Supreme Court in the Bronx, and Vice-Chair of the Court Interpreters' Chapter/Local 1070.]

There still are conflicting views on the value of joining labor unions.

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