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Legal Services Lawyers' Strike Puts Cases in Limbo

By CRAIG WOLFF

Confused by a locked door, the young woman looked at a small notice taped to the wall. She shook her head over the small print at the bottom, but on the top in block letters the situation at the Legal Services office on 10th Avenue was clearly spelled out: STRIKE.

Bewildered, the woman began shouting: "The rent, the rent! They throw us out!"

A friend consoled her but could not tell her what to do next. Most of the 250 Legal Services lawyers and staff members walked out on April 1, leaving thousands of people in New York City facing eviction and other legal problems without representation.

Without lawyers, people find themselves snarled in bureaucratic red tape, placed in limbo by judges who adjourn their cases or forced to yield without challenge to the demands of landlords and others.

The Issue: Low Pay

The union representing the lawyers, paralegals and clerical workers is seeking an end to an entrenched practice in the field of public law: low pay. The union, the Legal Services Staff Association, has demanded a 30 percent wage increase for lawyers in the first year of a two-year contract and an 11 percent increase in the second year.

Deborah Stein, a co-president of the union, said it asked for such a large raise because more than \$4 million was available through a state fund recently freed from escrow.

"We've been underpaid for a long time, but we were realistic — there wasn't money," she said. "Now there is."

Legal Services management has offered 15 percent to the lawyers in the first year and 7.3 percent in the second year, with lesser increases to others.

Legal Services salaries range from

A union seeks to change what it sees as low pay for professionals.

\$28,000 for new lawyers to the "mid-50's" for someone who graduated law school as far back as 1965, said Scott Sommer, a lawyer who is on strike.

In contrast, the Legal Aid Society increases pay systematically so that a lawyer with 13 years' experience is paid about \$60,000. As a consequence, Mr. Sommer said, Legal Services loses many lawyers in a few years.

Unlike Legal Aid, which depends chiefly on fees paid by New York City, Legal Services is financed by city, state and Federal sources. Both organizations are privately run and usually offer their services free to people who cannot otherwise afford a lawyer.

20 Arrested in Sit-In

On Thursday, 20 striking employees, frustrated at what they saw as a hardening stance by management, were arrested for criminal trespassing after holding a sit-in at the offices of Cleary, Gottlieb, Steen & Hamilton, where Christopher H. Lunding, head of the board of Legal Services of New York, is a partner.

Union leaders said they had taken over his office after he did not respond to requests for a board meeting.

Protesters, dressed in what some called their "lawyer suits," got by the reception desk on the 38th floor at 1 Liberty Street in lower Manhattan and began chanting union slogans.

In an interview, Mr. Lunding ac-

knowledged the strikers' predicament, but said the money was not available.

Some Legal Service managers are going to court with clients to help them get adjournments, but the organization is not taking any new cases and has closed three of its 15 offices.

"Basically what's happening," said Jenny Laurie, a staff organizer for the Metropolitan Council on Housing, "is that a lot of people are giving up or their lives are placed on hold."

The Legal Aid Society deals mostly with criminal cases, while most of the work at Legal Services is concerned with housing problems and other civil litigation. Typically, Mr. Sommer said, people go to Legal Services when they have been denied payments because of administrative mix-ups. They then fall behind on their rent, a result that leads to confrontations with their landlords.

The woman who ended up screaming outside the locked office door said her landlord was threatening her with eviction if she did not remove her three cats from her apartment. She responded by withholding rent for the last two months, and the landlord, she said, retaliated by turning off the heat.

"They'll end up having to fight their cause several months from now," Mr. Sommer said. "In other words, the mess in their lives will be that much greater."

Ms. Stein said management first took an open position.

"But I get the feeling management is digging in their heels, determined not to set a precedent," said Ms. Stein, who, like many of the lawyers now on strike, left well-paying positions to do what they believe is fulfilling and important work.

Negotiations have focused on bridging a huge space between the union and the management team, led by the executive director of Legal Services, Dale Johnson.