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## ‘Even With the Law On Our Side They Tried To Shut Us Down’

**T**he knee-jerk anti-union attitude among too many managers at too many U.S. workplaces is a tough habit to break, as George De Vane learned when he helped organize his office at what’s now AT&T Mobility.

In 2004, the company became Cingular Wireless. Unlike its two previous incarnations, as Vanguard Wireless and then AT&T Wireless, Cingular made an agreement with the Communications Workers of America to stay neutral in organizing drives and to recognize a union when a majority of workers signed cards seeking representation.

But De Vane’s managers didn’t get the message. “They were all operating from an outdated paradigm of union-busting that they learned well from AT&T Wireless,” he says. Three times they even called the police to stop union supporters from passing out flyers on company property.

One time when De Vane was passing out literature in the break room, a human resources manager came in and ordered him to stop, claiming it wasn’t allowed. De Vane obeyed, but called representatives at his CWA local who gave him a copy of the National Labor Relations Act with a section highlighted.

It made clear that distributing union literature in non-work areas was permitted by law — even if the company hadn’t signed the neutrality agreement. “Even with the law on our side they tried to shut us down,” he says.

De Vane and his colleagues had contacted CWA to organize a union after the company announced a 200 percent hike in workers’ share of insurance premiums, along with the news that none of them were getting raises.

They had high hopes that the neutrality agreement would give them an opportunity to organize without harassment or fear of losing their jobs. But in the two months or so that it took managers to accept the change, several union supporters were fired. The hostility to unions was just that ingrained, De Vane says.

Finally, things got better as the new attitude at the top of the company trickled down. “Privately, some managers

still maintained their opposition to unions, but they were afraid of the consequences of breaking from the mandate,” De Vane says. Four years later, the union has helped build a bridge between workers and managers, he says,

boosting morale and job satisfaction.

His experience is why he strongly believes in the Employee Free Choice Act. The anti-union stranglehold on American workplaces needs to be broken, he says, so all workers can decide for themselves — free of hassles, threats and other interference from managers —

whether to join a union.

“Our organizing effort is an extraordinary case of how the right legislation can shape behavior and promote a sense of fairness in even the most unlikely environments,” De Vane says. “I saw firsthand how the neutrality and majority sign-up agreements turned a potential battleground into an environment that stressed mutual respect.”



*George Devane*