

An Interview with CWA negotiating committee member LAMAR: Maddox 12/14/2004
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No matter what your job title, pay and job security are the two big contract issues for Cingular employees...

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QUESTION: What's your job at Cingular?

LAMAR: I'm a Wireless Tech II. I've been at Cingular almost five years. CWA was in the process of bargaining the first contract when I was hired. I've been a CWA shop steward since 2001. I received my steward training from my local, 2107, and right now I'm waiting for advanced steward training.

QUESTION: How did you come to be on the national bargaining committee?

LAMAR: I threw my hat into the ring because I wanted input into the contract and my local wanted to stress the technician issues. I'm very familiar with the concerns of the techs. Others on the committee are focused on retail and call center issues. Together we have all the bases covered.

QUESTION: Where do you work?

LAMAR: Our network operations are based in Hanover MD, but my territory is the whole eastern shore of Maryland and Virginia.

QUESTION: What's your job, what do you do?

LAMAR: We trouble-shoot the RF equipment associated with the uplink and down link of your cell phone. We trouble-shoot all the electronic equipment and perform the routine maintenance. Each tech is assigned a group of cell sites in an area and you maintain that group of sites. We schedule our own maintenance for the sites in our area – that's our responsibility. We're a 24-hour operation so we rotate an on-call tour once a week on top of our regular 40-hour week. The on-call has to be available for overnight issues, outages, and equipment failures. We get an additional \$20 per on-call day, in addition to the overtime hours. You do about 60 hours a week when you add in your on-call. Most techs I work with don't have a problem with the OT – most like the extra money. Our overtime is not forced; so most techs feel we can live with it.

QUESTION: How many techs are working out of your Hanover location?

LAMAR: There are 24 of us, divided between the switch techs and the field techs and the 7 drive techs who drive the territory testing signal and optimizing the cell sites. Our switch techs are responsible for building trunks, testing the T1's opening trouble tickets with Verizon, etc.

QUESTION: What would you say are the main issues techs are looking at in this contract negotiation?

LAMAR: A lot of the things techs are looking for are the same as all Cingular employees are looking for – job security in the merger and higher pay. We also have a number of issues that apply specifically to techs. Overall our attitude is that Cingular is a pretty good company to work for, but there are some serious issues that need to be corrected and the contract negotiation is a time when management needs to see those issues from the employee point of view.

QUESTION: What's the tech pay issue?

LAMAR: Since the last contract, we have a progressive pay scale, but a lot of techs were already at the max by the time the 2001 contract was in place so they never got a raise in 4 years, just the lump sum. And those that weren't over the pay scale are now at the top. So, we're trying to get the whole scale increased each year of the contract, and we also believe the scale should top out at 5 years, instead of the current 7.5 years. We're researching other companies to see how long their tech progression is.

QUESTION: What's the job security issue?

LAMAR: Techs are nervous about the ATT Wireless acquisition. They fear they will lose seniority and be bumped down by ATT'ers with more seniority. That would put us in jeopardy of being bumped out in a layoff. We're requesting information on their average seniority so we can figure out a fair way to protect us all.

We really want to welcome the ATT'ers, but we don't want to get our throats cut in the process. We're only concerned with bumping and bidding seniority – we don't have any problem with their extra pension or vacation accrual, just with scheduling and bumping.

QUESTION: What has happened in your area since the acquisition?

LAMAR: The Cingular and ATT Wireless techs met at a kickoff in November – a meet and greet. It was brief. Management's message was, "no one should fear losing their job if you a good worker. If you have problems coming in late you should be worried."

That's really not enough. Management shouldn't use the merger as an excuse to deal with attendance or discipline – there are programs in place for that. There were no specifics about seniority. All they said is that for one year we'll be running "Orange and Blue" with no crossing of personnel. We're looking for specifics.

QUESTION: Are there other specific tech issues you are focusing on in these negotiations?

LAMAR: Safety is always an issue in this type of work. We want specific guarantees that our RF monitoring equipment that tells us if we're in an RF hot-zone is up to date and calibrated. We want specific guidelines about working at a site in lightning situations. We want objective information about the safety of the sites in lightning – is it safe to be at the site or not? It's real **QUESTION:**; one of our sites was hit and blown up – they were pulling pieces of metal out of the walls.

Another big issue is contractors. We want to limit or do away with contracted work. Every six months or so our job responsibilities seem to be less and less because work is turned over to contractors. Especially now with ATT'ers being consolidated we're all concerned about job security so this is no time to be contracting out work.

QUESTION: What work do the contractors do in your area?

LAMAR: First of all, they do new installation and ongoing maintenance. Management tells us that's because contracts to purchase Nokia and Erickson equipment come with mandatory installation and maintenance contracts, and those company techs have to maintain the equipment for a certain number of years to maintain the warranty. We don't know if that's concrete or not. We've never seen one of those contracts, and we also assume that if Cingular, the largest wireless provider in the U.S. wanted only limited maintenance contracts, then they would get only limited maintenance contracts. We want the Cingular techs phased in and trained to do the maintenance over a couple of month period.

QUESTION: Are there other contract issues?

LAMAR: There's another kind of contracting, and there's no real excuse for it. Management hires techs from temp agencies – in our area it's Glo-Tel or Tech Systems – instead of hiring enough Cingular techs to cover the network. We never have enough techs to cover our network so they're always hiring temps. We're always in a "hiring freeze" but they turn around and hire 5 or 6 techs for 6 months, some times up to a year. And our techs have to train these employees to do our work. We really don't like that. We think temp techs should be limited to a period of 1 or 2 weeks at most to fill in for an emergency, not to run the operation month in, month out.

QUESTION: Is there another big tech issue?

LAMAR: Training. As in, we don't get any. That's one of the reasons we aren't doing the maintenance on new equipment. Cingular's contracts with Nokia should say their techs will install and maintain for a transition period (say three months) while our techs are being trained.

We need more training. We get very little formal training. The majority of our training is tech-to-tech. One tech will get a piece of training from Nokia then he has to share it with the other techs, on the fly. We need to have full, formal training on the equipment. It's surprising how little training Cingular gives its technicians.

QUESTION: Is the committee ready for these negotiations?

LAMAR: Oh yes. We're working together to cover all the issues, whether it's call center, retail or tech. We've got our proposals together. We're expecting to have very productive conversations with management. As I said earlier, this is a pretty good company to work for, but there are employee issues that need to be addressed. We're all looking forward to it.