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My name is Cherie Heinze. I am a customer service representative at AT&T and have been working there for seven years. I am also a CWA Local 9421 union steward and a member of the Local's organizing committee.

In CWA District 9, at the time we started organizing Cingular Wireless there were a total of 3,786 employees in two bargaining units. One bargaining unit was made up of 3 call centers operating in the state with 2,149 employees and the other bargaining unit was made up of 1,647 retail reps who worked in 213 stores throughout the state. These were the major bargaining units making up the Cingular workforce in California.

While we expected to approach the organizing as we typically do, this was going to be a very different organizing campaign. Cingular Wireless had just bought AT&T Wireless to form one large wireless company. And Cingular Wireless was union friendly, that is they were not hostile to its workers forming a union and they agreed with card check, a method that allows workers to join a union once a majority sign cards for representation.

The call center in Sacramento employed 800 workers and there were 17 stores with 114 workers. Our task was to sign up a majority in each of these units.

We began with three initial contacts at our first meeting at the call center. The workforce structure was that there were 50 work teams made up of 15 workers per team roughly. Our goal was to build a committee and to find a team leader for each team to make up the committee. The campaign included distribution of weekly fliers, hold informational meetings and phone banking to identify support and educate about the union.

This was done from the outside at first until leadership was put in place in the work groups. Through our leaders, and phoning, we confirmed that we had over 50% of the workforce supporting the union.

Our next step was to go public. At that point, the fear took a backseat to the workplace issues. The workers themselves stood at the driveways with photo leaflets expressing their support for the union. From then on, the workers themselves helped with phoning, sat in the cafeteria during lunch and on their days off and answered questions of co-workers, generally getting ready to collect cards calling for representation.

At the same time, we were focusing on the retail stores as well. With neutrality, we were given access to the work group and were able to sit in the break room to answer questions and give information.

We had 60 days from the date the first card was signed to gather a majority on cards for each bargaining unit. We put cards out on September 12 and by October 13 we received confirmation that our card count established majority support in Sacramento and throughout the state for these bargaining units.

The experience of going through an organizing campaign such as this is unlike any other. First, the employer—a very large U.S. corporation remained entirely neutral throughout. Moreover, the union was given access to the workers in the open, public areas such as the break rooms and cafeteria to educate them on what a union in the workplace means.

In a typical campaign the period between filing for the election and the election itself was eliminated. This stage would normally allow the employer another "bite at the apple"—a period of time when the employer normally would hold captive audience meetings and other activities designed to dissuade workers from voting union.

Here, the decision on whether to gain union representation in a workplace was done in an open, information-gathering discussion between the union and between co-workers and if the decision is 'yes,' the worker signs a card requesting the union. Organizing a union in this way allows workers to be able to truly make a free choice on the question of union representation.