

Grumbling Firemen

By RALEIGH BRYANS

A number — evidently a large number — of disgruntled Atlanta firemen have defected from their old union to join a new "independent" union that is exhibiting militancy and is seeking greater wage gains for them.

The new union is now pressuring city officials to recognize it as negotiating agent for firemen with an apparent threat that firemen will take extraordinary action on their own if officials do not.

The union is Atlanta Firefighters Union, Inc., independent. Its attorney and business representative, Robert L. Mitchell, voiced this apparent threat in a May 16 letter addressed to Alderman W. T. Knight, chairman of the city's Board of Firemasters.

MR. MITCHELL stated that "if negotiations are not commenced immediately, then the members of this union will have no choice but to promulgate their own working rules, which will be placed into effect immediately."

In the same letter, Mr. Mitchell gave Mr. Knight what was the first information any responsible city official had received regarding the nature of the wage and hour demands the new union is making.

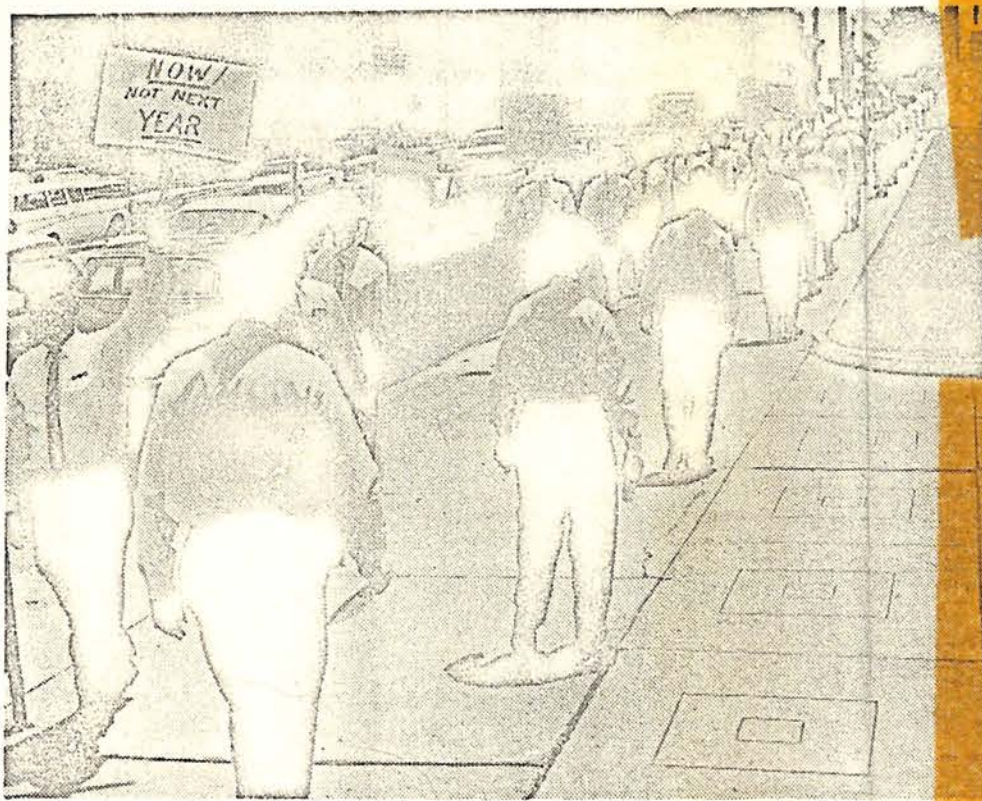
"Upon behalf of the Atlanta firemen," wrote Mr. Mitchell, "we are willing to agree at this time to a 56-hour week coupled with a \$100 per month wage increase for each fireman on a one-year basis."

The demand for a 56-hour work week is not new. It was the major demand made at the start of 1965 by firemen when they were represented by their old union, Local 134, International Association of Firefighters, AFL-CIO.

But brand-new is the new union's demand for a \$100 per month wage increase. And new, and extraordinary, is the union representative's giveaway that his organization is contemplating a one-year union-city contract. City annals do not reflect any precedent for such a contract.

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City officials contend this is not the case. However, they do make it clear that circumstances are making it difficult for them to decide whether to recognize the new union. The old firemen's union is vying to keep its position as spokesman



Staff Photo—Charles Pugh

ATLANTA CITY HALL GETS PICKETS AS FIREMEN SEEK INCREASE IN PAY
Placards Ask for Immediate Action Concerning Pay and Working Hours

charter to officials of AFL-CIO. The new union was formed, according to Capt. Martin, on April 19. This, judging by Mr. McIver's newsletter, must have followed a Local 134 meeting at which members expressed their disenchantment and indicated their plans to defect from the local.

There have been persistent, but strictly unconfirmed, rumors that Capt. Martin's new union is oriented to the Teamsters Union. Hearsay has it that the Teamsters Union did send in organizers to lure firemen into a Teamsters' affiliate but did not succeed in that. But firemen may have had help from Teamsters organizers in forming their "independent" union. That, again, is rumor.

The disgruntlement of city firemen came to a head this year as they had for a number of years firemen at budget-making time had pressured the aldermanic finance committee to shorten the fire department work week. The finance committee declined this, saying the city budget was too tight.

THROUGH LOCAL 134, firemen subsequently mounted an aggressive campaign to persuade aldermen to change their minds. They appeared at City Hall in great numbers when the finance committee accorded them a special hearing. But they were told, finally, on March 21, that the committee's position still was the same — there just wasn't money enough available.

They did get a solemn pledge from the full Board of Aldermen and Mayor Allen that their request for a shorter work week

The city's present position has been laid down by Mayor Allen's administrative assistant, Earl Landers. This position, quite candidly, is that city leaders do not share firemen's evident strong belief that they have been badly treated at the city budget table. This, interestingly, is a position taken by Local 134 President McIver in his April newsletter.

MR. LANDERS (as did Mr. McIver) details improved wage and other benefits which have accrued to firemen in the six-year period between in 1960 and this year.

In these six years, firemen have received six increment pay increases. These increment increases did not come in one a year, however. In 1960, they, together with city policemen, were granted a two-increment increase, while other city employes got one. In 1962 they got a second two-increment increase along with all other city employes. In 1965 and again in 1966, they benefitted from one-increment general increases.

The impact of the six recent increment increases for pri-

vates in the fire department was that their monthly pay rose from \$403 in 1960 to \$497 in 1966, or 23.3 per cent. In the same six years, firemen's 25-year service pensions increased from \$150 a month to \$227.50, or 61.6 per cent. Their 35-year service pensions rose from \$200 a month to \$295.80 a month, or 47.9 per cent. Their line-of-duty disability pensions rose from \$150 a month to \$323.05 a month, or 115 per cent. And widow's benefits on disability pensions rose from \$112.50 a month to \$242.28 a month, or 115 per cent again.

MR. LANDERS points out that wage and pension increases accorded firemen have boosted the annual fire department appropriations from \$3,765,955 in 1960 to \$5,247,678 in 1966, or an aggregate of \$1,581,734. This, he says, is the equivalent of more than one mill of taxation, based on the 1965 tax digest. He indicates the city feels it is meaningful to local taxpayers that the six-year \$1,581,734 increase in outlays for firemen's salaries and pensions was realized without a tax increase.

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"This resolves itself into a contest between two groups who claim they are representing the members of the fire department," says Mayor Allen.

If the claims of its president are to be accepted, the new union has laid hold of a sizable majority of the men in the fire department. Capt. Martin said Tuesday that 550 of 718 "eligible men" in the department are members of his union. (Officially, there are 726 firefighters.)

On the other hand, the president of the old AFL-CIO firemen's union has said in a newsletter published recently that "there will always be a Local 134, International Association of Firefighters," and that the old union is still very much in business.

RADIOMAN JIMMY McIVER disputed reports — reports apparently circulated by members of the new competing union — that Local 134 has turned in its

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WHAT FIREMEN demanded, back in January and again in March was a reduction of their work week from 60 hours to 56 hours and time-and-a-half overtime pay for any work they performed beyond the 40 hours that most other city employees work. This would have cost the city \$1.1 million, according to City Comptroller Charles L. Davis.

The finance committee's, and the city administration's, position at the time was that the 1966 budget was the tightest in years. This was in large part the case, finance officials insisted, because the budget included a one-step pay raise for all city personnel — firemen included. The firemen's demands, said city officials, could only be met by raising the city's ad valorem tax rate. This latter the city administration was unwilling to contemplate.

Seek Wage Hike

In newspaper advertisements they have run, and in leaflets they have distributed about town, the firemen members of the new union have expressed sharp bitterness not only with their 60-hour work week but with existing pay scales, no matter how improved since 1960.

"If you were working 50 hours one week and 70 hours the next for \$1.55 per hour, you would do one of two things: Demand better working conditions or resign," reads one leaflet.

The \$1.55 per hour figure is cited as a minimum, and elsewhere, \$1.91 per hour is cited as the maximum. The leaflet includes a statement by the firemen's union that 125 firemen did quit the fire department last year "because they couldn't make enough 'moonlighting' to supplement their poor salary as firemen to support their families."

IN THEIR RECENT actions — their breakaway from their old union, their picketing, their efforts to enlist news media in their fight, their vigorously-waged telephone campaigns against City Hall — the firemen leave little doubt about the depth of their disgruntlement, or about their willingness to go to extreme means to obtain satisfaction of their demands. Their anger may well bode troublesome days ahead for officials at City Hall and for the general public in Atlanta.

Nonetheless, Mr. Landers — and here he speaks with full authority from Mayor Allen — sets out to put the firemen's complaints in perspective.

1 — Low wages prevail throughout the city government, so that firemen, in this regard, are not in a unique position. As already indicated, firemen actually fared better — six incremental increases to five — than the bulk of city employees did in the 1960-66 period. The city is acutely aware that it must improve city salaries generally or it will not be in a position to compete with private enterprise for able employees. To this end, it has retained the Public Administration Service, a Chicago management consultants firm, to do a study of its salary schedules. This will be completed by this fall and will be used as the basis for probable general wage adjustments at the turn of the next year.

2 — The wages and hours prevailing in the Atlanta Fire Department compare well with those in other cities, whether in Georgia, in the Southeast, or the nation as a whole. The minimum annual salary of an Atlanta fireman is the highest of any in six Georgia cities — Atlanta, Columbus, Savannah, Albany, Augusta and Macon. It is \$4,641. The average for the six Georgia cities, with Atlanta's figured in, is \$4,163. The 60-hour work week prevailing in Atlanta stands alone among the six cities. In all the others, a 72-hour work week prevails.

THE ATLANTA minimum also exceeds the average for 17 ma-

for Southeastern cities (New Orleans, Atlanta, Birmingham, Louisville, Memphis, Miami, Nashville, Norfolk, Little Rock, Mobile, Montgomery and Richmond). The average for these cities is \$4,316. Among these cities, four pay a slightly higher minimum than Atlanta, as follows: Birmingham, \$4,716 (the highest); Miami, \$4,680; Nashville, \$4,680, and Norfolk, \$4,680. Seven of the 17 cities have a 56-hour work week for firemen; four, including Atlanta, have a 60-hour work week; the remainder have either 72- or 78-hour work weeks. In 13 of the 17 cities, firemen work a 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ -hours-on, 24-hours-off basis.

Atlanta compares less well with what major cities in its population class are doing. The cities, besides Atlanta, are Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Seattle, Columbus, Denver, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Memphis, Minneapolis and Phoenix. The Atlanta minimum wage is the lowest. Seattle's is the highest, \$6,420. The average for the 11 cities, Atlanta included, is \$5,410. A 60-or-better work week prevails only in Minneapolis (60), Memphis (72), Indianapolis (63), Denver (68). Buffalo, with a 40-hour week, is lowest, Seattle next, with a 48-hour week. Pittsburgh has a 52-hour week, the rest, a 56-hour week.

3 — Some general clarification is needed of conditions that prevail in the Atlanta fire department. When one says firemen work a 60-hour week, it does not mean they work seven days a week. Actually, firemen work five days a week, then take two off.

Those on the day shift work 10 hours a shift; those on the night shift, 14 hours. Firemen who have the day shift one week will work the longer night shift the following week. The five-days-on, two-days-off regime means, moreover, that firemen get 104 days off during the course of a year. And on top of that, they get 20 days of vacation time and time off for seven holidays. In terms of the fact that they are off duty 131 of the 365 days in a year, they may be inaccurate in the way they have figured their hourly wages. For example, the \$1.91 maximum hourly wage cited in their leaflet might more accurately be said to be \$2.17. Firemen, in addition, are furnished free uniforms, and at their fire stations,

have quarters where they may sleep when there are no fire calls, and kitchens where on-duty-hour meals are cooked.

4 — It is untrue, as the new union has claimed, that 125 firemen resigned from the department last year to accept better jobs elsewhere. Actually, 58 firemen quit the department, and even so, eight of these were re-employed subsequently.

For Pugh
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