Labor History: MLB Umpire's Resignations

By Ed Leavy, SVFT Executive Union Representative

It has become clear that while the newsletter articles on labor history were designed to celebrate the accomplishments of organized labor and the courage of the men and women who undertook the fight to secure workers' rights, they have in many cases become contemplations of unions failing their membership. In union leadership, there is always the balance between passionately fighting for what is seen as right, and dispassionately assessing the odds of success. Successful unions sometimes underestimate the possibility and repercussions of failure. Such was the case of the major league baseball umpire's union under the leadership of Richie Phillips in 1999.

There can be no doubting Phillip's early success as the president of the MLUA. When he took over the union in 1978, salaries ranged from $17,500 to $39,000; by 1999 the salary structure was $95,000 to $250,000. He also got umpires four weeks of paid vacation per season. Some of his other victories were more controversial. Lucrative assignments to the playoffs, the World Series, and the All-Star game went from being based on merit to being rotated among all umpires. Phillips even questioned the right of Major League Baseball to evaluate the performance of umpires. He told HBO's *Real Sports* in 1999, "I equate umpires with federal judges, and I don't believe that they should be subject to the voter, just like federal judges are not subject to the voter."

Phillips was widely seen as egotistical, even by the umpires who hired him. He demanded sole control over union dues money – all checks from the MLUA bore his and only his signature – and refused to share financial records with the membership. He was paid $300,000 per year, but billed the union separately per hour for union work. Many fans and players believed that the umpires themselves began to mimic Phillip's arrogance. Anyone who remembers baseball from the late 1990s remembers umpires being so confrontational that they would pursue players to the dugout to argue and throw players out of the game with little provocation. Concerns with the performance of umpires became significant enough for Commissioner Bud Selig to hire Sandy Alderson to supervise the umpires and institute changes he viewed as necessary.

Phillips viewed the action of MLB as unduly provocative. On July 14, 1999 he announced that 57 of the 66 umpires had resigned in protest over such actions as MLB's redefining the rulebook to address the umpires' refusal to call the high strike, charting pitches to evaluate each umpire's strike zone, and suspending umpire Tom Hallion for bumping a player. Phillips stated that the umpires "want to continue working… but they want to feel good about themselves and would rather not continue as umpires if they have to continue under present circumstances. They feel in the past seven months or so, they have been humiliated and degraded." They resignations would take place on September 2 – just in time for the pennant races and playoffs – and would begin working for a company called Umpires, Inc.; the company, not surprisingly, would be run by Richie Phillips.

The move immediately began to be questioned. The resignations were viewed as a transparent attempt to circumvent the no-strike clause that Phillips had agreed to in the previous contract.

Sandy Alderson called the letters, “a threat to be ignored or an offer to be accepted.” Many umpires quickly asked to rescind their letters. Ultimately, MLB accepted the resignations of 22 of the umpires, in some cases refusing the umpires attempt to rescind them, and replaced them on September 2. Several years later, those umpires struck deals with MLB for severance pay, pensions, and rights into future jobs. None of those deals remotely compared to the money they gave up, nor undid the years while they awaited the deal. One umpire was working part-time jobs and could not afford to fly to Colorado to see his daughter graduate.

Phillip’s contract with the union was not renewed, of course. He continued to fight MLB in court, arguing that MLB had no right to accept the resignations, because they “must be viewed as a symbolic gesture aimed at inducing discussions between the two sides.” Ultimately, his case was dismissed. His action is a cautionary tale about understanding the limits of one’s power, and not taking actions that puts members at risk.

Information for this article was gathered from a number of articles found on the internet.