

AFSCME: 75 Years of History

Fighting for Working Families

A Short History of AFSCME

The history of AFSCME began in 1932, as the country suffered through a severe economic depression, when a small group of white-collar professional state employees met in Madison, Wisconsin, and formed what would later become Wisconsin State Employees Union/Council 24. The reason for the group's creation was simple: to promote, defend and enhance the civil service system. They also were determined to help spread the civil service system across the country.



State employees feared that politicians would implement a political patronage or “spoils” system and thousands of workers would lose their jobs. Meetings were held, marches and demonstrations were organized, and the Wisconsin State Employers Association saved the civil service system in Wisconsin. By the 1930s, such organizations existed in major cities and states around the country, saving the civil service system nationwide. In 1936, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) granted a charter for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). And Arnold Zander was chosen as AFSCME's

first International President.

Growth did not come easily at first. The union's primary tactic was lobbying to pass or strengthen civil service laws. At the end of 1936, AFSCME had 10,000 members. Ten years later membership was up to 73,000. In the 1950s, the viewpoint and composition of AFSCME began to change. Many of the union's new members were blue-collar workers and came from big cities that had strong trade union roots and traditions. The 1955 merger with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) brought in 40,000 members and a strong commitment to collective bargaining as the means to improve working conditions.

In 1958, a series of strikes and demonstrations forced the mayor of New York City to grant collective bargaining rights to unions representing city employees. A turning point had been reached. The desire for collective bargaining became AFSCME's driving force. In New York City, under the leadership of Jerry Wurf, AFSCME began winning elections that made it the strongest public worker union in the city. At the 1964 AFSCME International Convention, Wurf — running on a platform of more aggressive organizing, pursuit of collective bargaining rights for public employees, and union reform/union democracy — was elected the second International President. A year later, a special convention re-wrote AFSCME's International Constitution and included a “Bill of Rights” for members, a first in the American labor movement.



During the 60s, AFSCME's struggles were linked with those of the civil rights movement.

Progressive unions like AFSCME joined students and civil rights activists as they took to the streets to protest economic and racial oppression. This alliance culminated in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1968 when sanitation workers struck for



union recognition after two African-American workers were crushed to death in a garbage truck. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was organizing the Poor People's March, went to Memphis to support the strike. Only after Dr. King's assassination did the city agree to recognize the workers' union, AFSCME Local 1733. By the

end of 1969, several states had enacted collective bargaining laws and the union's membership grew to more than 250,000. At the bargaining table AFSCME and other unions gained substantial breakthroughs in living standards such as living wages and family health insurance that greatly exceeded those achieved by non-union workers.

In the 1970s and 80s, AFSCME members increased their efforts politically in order to win collective bargaining laws, organize new members, and wield clout on behalf of existing members. All across the country, at every level of government, candidates for public office learned they had to pay attention to AFSCME's political muscle. During this time, AFSCME also enjoyed phenomenal success in affiliating independent associations of public employees. Almost 60 associations, representing 450,000 members, joined AFSCME by affiliation or merger. With the affiliation in 1978 of the state of New York Civil Service Employees Association, AFSCME membership passed the 1-million-member mark.

AFSCME's growth across the country gave the union a more powerful voice when it came to fighting the injustices of the day. On September 19, 1981, at the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Day — a massive demonstration in the nation's capital demanding fair treatment for U.S. workers — AFSCME's 60,000-member delegation, the largest from any single union, led the march. That same year in San Jose, California, AFSCME Local 101 staged the first strike in the nation's history over the issue of pay equity. The action attracted national media attention and helped spark the pay equity movement. AFSCME affiliates in 10 states soon followed with pay equity actions of their own including lawsuits, legislation and bargaining demands.

In 1981, Gerald W. McEntee, leader of the successful drive to organize 80,000 Pennsylvania state employees (now Council 13), became the union's third International President. He succeeded Jerry Wurf who died in office. William Lucy — founder of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists — continued in his role as International Secretary-Treasurer. Their vision of AFSCME as the union of all public service workers — public or private — helped propel the union's political and organizing agenda for the decades that followed. During the 1980s, AFSCME won collective bargaining rights and organized workers in Alaska, Illinois, Nebraska and Ohio. In 1989, the affiliation of the health care union — National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees: NUHCE/AFSCME Local 1199 — helped solidify AFSCME as a leading voice in the fight for the rights of health care workers.



With state legislatures increasingly in the hands of the right wing, it became more difficult to expand collective bargaining rights in the 1990s. Governments at every level sought to cut costs by contracting out public service jobs and attacking the hard-won benefits and wages of union members. AFSCME responded by mobilizing its membership to a historic level, increasing its visibility and political influence. In 1995, AFSCME helped lead the change in the leadership and direction of the national AFL-CIO. At its national convention in 1998, AFSCME's members committed to an even bolder and more aggressive program of political action and organizing the unorganized.

Since 1998, 320,000 public service workers in a dozen states and Puerto Rico have joined AFSCME. They include private-sector food service workers, child care workers, health care workers and public-sector corrections officers, university employees, and social workers of every race and religious background, and speaking several languages.

United with their union brothers and sisters in their desire for fairness, economic justice and a voice on the job, they represent the face of AFSCME today.

With the turn of the new century, we find America at a crossroads. A battle for the country's soul, over its basic values, places us on the front lines. Privatizers, deregulators, tax-cutters, people who want to turn back the clock on racial justice and women's equality, and selfish people at the helm of corporations all seek to undermine and malign every area of public service, and to disarm our union. The stakes are high, and only a progressive organization like AFSCME — built by the sacrifices and risk-taking of public service workers for more than 70 years, and reinforced by the energies of committed organizers and new members joining our ranks — is up to the task.

