Before the Union

Don’t take rights, respect, or a decent standard of living for granted, early AFSCME activists say

When Mike Constant first started on a survey crew in the Department of Transportation, "you were just a number," he recalls. "They told you whatever they wanted with you. You had no say in anything."

That was in 1968. AFSCME existed, but state law did not allow public workers to bargain. "And without collective bargaining, we had nothing — absolutely nothing," he says.

"That's the way things were," says Kathy Wente, who started in 1967 as a human services technician at the Academies for the Deaf in Faribault.

"There was no negotiating back in those days. There was little ability to challenge decisions that were made."

Building a union step by step

Constant and Wente helped change that. They are part of the generation of government workers and AFSCME leaders at the state and local levels who pushed to create PELRA — the Public Employee Labor Relations Act. That law makes collective bargaining legal for public employees.

They negotiated the first AFSCME contracts, then built those contracts year after year. They built power on the job and on the picket line, so public workers could earn (and retire with) a decent standard of living.

The boss controlled your life

It's no secret that anti-union legislators still want to limit public employee wages and benefits — or eliminate unionized government jobs entirely. Constant and Wente remember too well what it was like before a contract provided stability and leverage in their work lives.

In the academies, Wente says, training was minimal — you learned the hard way. Caseloads were huge, and scheduling played havoc with workers' personal lives: Staff didn't have consecutive days off, and some staff had to work split shifts. That meant they worked part of the day, went home, then worked again later the same day. There were no shift differentials, either.

In DOT, highway crews could not take vacation from April through Thanksgiving. "They told you when to take it," Constant says. "Those kinds of work schedules made most family vacations impossible."

Crews might work 14-hour days in the summer, but weren't paid overtime. Instead, they had to bank the extra hours, then draw those down during winter layoffs. Necessity and favoritism were common in hiring and promotions. Members routinely worked out of class — taking on responsibilities beyond their basic job duties, without getting paid extra. "It was a crazy system, but you had no choice," he says.

Supervisors held all the cards

Underneath it all was the basic reality of unfair treatment.

"A civil service board made up the rules, and they kind of dictated out to the different agencies," Wente says.

"So you didn't really have the same rights as you have now."

In particular, there were no grievances or arbitration procedures to fight discipline or dismissals.

"If your supervisor came down on you for something, you could go through this useless appeals system," Constant says.

"But the individual who charged you in the first place had the final say."

1981 strike made a big difference

A turning point in building AFSCME in Minnesota was the 1981 strike, when 14,000 state workers walked out. "It surprised a whole lot of people," Mike Constant says.

"It may sound funny to say, but we had the best damn time on that strike. It was unbelievable. We were showing the state and everybody else that you're not going to walk over us anymore. We're going to fight you, as long as it takes."

The strike built genuine solidarity, he says.

"In a lot of areas, those of us in DOT didn't know what they did in the state hospitals, or in the Ag Department, or vice versa. We started getting together on these picket lines. We got to know each other. It happened statewide. We came out of that strike so unified, it was just wonderful."

"We were there because we were going to stand up for ourselves and, by God, we did. And 22 days later, the state says, 'OK, we give up.' And we got a helluva a good contract out of it. And we got the respect of the state, some of the public, and other unions — 'Hey, these folks are for real. They're real unionists.'"

"We gained respect from our members, from our fellow employees. We started picking up members. It took that to bring us together as a group, as a union. We showed them what we could do when we had to do it, and why we were doing it. It was the best thing we could have done."
Workers have to fight for everything we’ve got

Kathy Wente and Mike Constant fear that, four decades after PELRA became law, public employees don’t realize how close they are to losing it all. They point out how Gov. Scott Walker gutted worker rights in Wisconsin, how Republican legislatures kneecapped unions in Michigan and Indiana, and how Republican disciples of ALEC want to do the same things in Minnesota.

“I could see it the last few years I was working,” Constant says. Most newer co-workers didn’t seem to understand what it took to achieve the wages, benefits, hours, working conditions, and protections they now take for granted. They don’t remember, for example, when state workers paid for health insurance entirely on their own.

“There are so many people who think we gave the state our money on a platter,” Constant says. “But we didn’t give them a damn thing. We had to fight for everything. We didn’t always have this contract. We didn’t have a damn thing here. And now we have to fight just to keep it.”

A short list of what a union means in our lives

• Strength in numbers, which gives us power at work
• A voice on the job—the ability to negotiate our working conditions
• Power and influence in politics and legislation, which gives us the leverage to fight for better contracts and for the services we provide
• The unity to demand respect and stand eye-to-eye with elected officials and department bosses
• A grievance and arbitration process to protect against unjust treatment, discipline, or dismissal
• Guaranteed wages
• Pay scales that build careers and limit favoritism and discrimination
• Guaranteed benefits, including health insurance
• The ability to retire with dignity, including with a defined-benefit pension
• Guaranteed vacations and other paid time off
• Scheduling and overtime protections, including the ability to have a personal life
• Seniority rights
• Safer workplaces
• Job protections, including probationary periods, posting requirements for vacant jobs, and bumping rights and recall rights in the case of layoffs
• Access to training, research, and solidarity with 43,000 other AFSCME members in Minnesota

‘De-listing’ puts DNR in charge of wolves’ future

When the federal government removed wolves from the Endangered Species List last year, it put the predator’s future in the hands of Minnesota’s DNR. That gives Local 718 members such as Kevin Carlisle a direct role in managing and monitoring the state’s 3,000 wild wolves.

As a wildlife technician at the DNR’s Grand Rapids regional headquarters, Carlisle helps perform the basic biopies required of every wolf that is shot or trapped in the state. Performing the biopies “is pretty common knowledge for most of us in the field,” Carlisle says. He compares it to the work technicians do to monitor white-tailed deer for chronic wasting disease.

“It’s another task added to our duties, but it’s a great extra workload to have. Being able to collect this data will be very beneficial to helping us track the dynamics of the animals.”

Building up a baseline

The federal decision to de-list wolves in 2012, and the DNR’s decision to allow hunting and trapping, remain controversial. Both have been targets of lawsuits and public protests.

To Carlisle, both decisions are sound science. Minnesota’s wolf population is the largest in the lower 48 states, he says, and has been stable for years. The basic biopies, tests, and tissue analysis that DNR labs perform help develop a much more complete picture of the well-being of the wolf population.

In a biopsy, Carlisle removes a tooth and muscle sample from every wolf. He also takes liver, kidney, and uterine specimens from female wolves.

Technicians send the samples to DNR and university labs. Tooth samples establish the wolf’s age. Examining scar tissue of females who have been pregnant reveals litter sizes. Other samples give clues to a wolf’s overall health, including uncovering diseases or whether contaminants such as lead or heavy metals are building up in body tissues.

That information, collected on all 412 wolves that were taken during the first hunting and trapping seasons, helps the DNR track breeding patterns and the age distribution of the population. “Overall, you want a good mix of old, young, and middle-age,” Carlisle says.

The current study of Minnesota’s wolf population will continue for at least five years. It’s similar to the long-running studies the DNR is conducting with fishers, martens, and bobcats.

“There’s been no hunting for a year now,” Carlisle says. “That will just scratch the surface, but it will give us a good start to recollect data. It will help us regulate it better.”

Officer rescues nurse in hospital showdown

One week, Local 600 member Shane Warnke Jr. was going through an intense, five-day course on crisis intervention, complete with professional actors simulating confrontations. A week later, it was no simulation when Warnke rescued a nurse being held hostage.

Warnke, a lieutenant at Stillwater Correctional Facility, was on special assignment the night of Oct. 12. He was part of a squad guarding offenders from Stillwater who were receiving medical treatment at St. Joseph’s Hospital in St. Paul.

Warnke was preparing to relieve a fellow officer when a nurse came running for help. Five rooms down, a patient had pinned another nurse to the floor and was holding scissors to her neck.

Warnke started talking to the patient, who seemed delusional, Warnke says, and was speaking in mixed-up words. “Remaining calm was the most important thing I did. I didn’t want to make it seem like it was a big deal.”

Correctional officer Shane Warnke Jr.

Correctional officers do not carry weapons, so almost always rely on conversation to diffuse situations. “It just kept talking,” Warnke says. Within two or three minutes, the man threw down his scissors, and hospital security subdued him. The nurse was shaken up, but not injured.

Only about 20 percent of correctional officers receive the specialized training Warnke got. He is amazed at how quickly it paid off. “It gave me more tools to use in a crisis situation,” he says. “Especially, it saved a life.”

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