

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 could do 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 Wenthe, 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 Wenthe 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 Wenthe remember too well what it was like before a contract provided stability and leverage in their work lives.

In the academies, Wenthe 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



Mike Constant: “If you don’t get involved, or pay attention to what’s going on, you’re going to lose it. You’re going to have to defend yourselves, or they’re going to take everything away from you. And that’s just exactly what they’re trying to do right now.”

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. Nepotism 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,” Wenthe says. “So you didn’t really have the same rights as you have now.”

In particular, there were no grievance 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.

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.

How often do you think the employee won anything? It was just a joke.”

“You could appeal their decision if they fired you,” Wenthe says. “But if they denied your appeal, you were stuck going out and finding your own representation through an attorney or something like that. And who can afford that kind of thing?”

The end of ‘collective begging’

Collective bargaining turned that around. Minneapolis teachers paved the way when they went on strike – illegally – in 1970. In 1971, unions mobilized to persuade the Legislature to give public workers bargaining rights. “We marched around the Capitol for days,” Constant says.

Then came the challenge of negotiating a first contract. From the beginning, AFSCME used a democratic, rather than top-down, process. The union had 450 members on its first bargaining team, packed into the basement of downtown Twin Cities hotels.

“We opened it up to members – tell us what you’d like,” Constant says. “Oh, boy. We had reams of ideas.

“Everybody was new to this. We didn’t know what the hell we were

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.”

“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



Kathy Wenthe: “When you believe in it from people to keep it alive.”

doing, and I’m not sure if the state did, either. But we came out of there with a contract, and that first contract was just so big for us. We didn’t get much, but we had one. Now we had something to work on. And it just progressed from there.”

Improving and protecting jobs

Collective bargaining achieved more than better wages, benefits and working conditions. It saved jobs. AFSCME fought, and continues to fight, attempts to privatize prisons, and privatize parts of DNR, DOT and other agencies, Constant says.

It was AFSCME that uncovered the state’s plan to shut down the academies, Wenthe says, and it was Local 607 that led the fight to keep them open. When DHS closed down the state hospital system, it was AFSCME that made sure workers got another job. “The union made sure there was a safety net, at least,” she says. “The union was there to make sure there was a system set up and that people were taken care of.”

“Each year we got a little smarter,” Constant says, “figured out a few more things. By the late ’80s, we had one helluva contract.”

Membership swelled. “People finally figured out: We can better ourselves, better our lives, better our families.”

“Once you started, there was never a thought of *not* doing it anymore,” Wenthe says. “You never thought of stopping, never thought of quitting, never thought of giving up the fight. You wanted to build on what you already had started. You never, never thought of giving up.” ■

1981 strike made a big difference

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...n the get-go, it's in your soul. And you keep trying to rally

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 knee-capped 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.

"Too many people think the state gave us this or gave us that," Constant says. "The state didn't give us 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