



# Q & A

## AFSCME Council 5, AFL-CIO

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### **Q: What is AFSCME?**

**A:** AFSCME stands for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. AFSCME is:

- the largest public employee union in the nation
- the nation's fastest-growing union
- the second largest union in the AFL-CIO—more than 1.2 million strong
- the *only* union chartered exclusively by the AFL-CIO to represent state and local employees and the men and women who work for universities, health and social service agencies
- the only union that devotes *all* of its energies to these employees

### **Q: What can AFSCME do for me?**

**A:** Give you power—power that will help you make decisions about promotion policies, job security, fair hearing of grievances, better wages, pensions, and much more.

You help determine your own future by joining with other public employees and by getting AFSCME's expert assistance and service.

### **Q: Why do I need a union?**

**A:** Simply talking about issues that affect public employees just isn't enough—you have to be heard. All by yourself, it's hard to be heard. You and your co-workers face similar problems and have similar needs. When you organize, you'll gain the strength to make the changes you need by working together. Through AFSCME, employees have a voice—one that is heard—on the job and in the legislatures and city halls.

### **Q: What is collective bargaining?**

**A:** Collective bargaining is the process for dealing with management over such things as wages, promotions, job security, transfer rights, career ladders, pensions, and other benefits. Here's how it works: The union's representatives—chosen by you—sit down and hammer out an agreement known as a "union contract" with management on every issue of concern to your bargaining unit. They sit at the bargaining table as equals with management. The union bargaining committee represents the united strength of all union members. The more members, the more strength you will have. But before any agreement is accepted by the committee, the majority of members will have to give their approval by ratifying the agreement.

### **Q: What is the difference between AFSCME and AFL-CIO?**

**A:** AFSCME is one of 60 unions affiliated with the AFL-CIO. The AFL-CIO is simply a federation of those 60 unions. AFSCME's president is a member of the executive council of the AFL-CIO and serves—as a member or in some cases as chair—of several important AFL-CIO committees.

### **Q: How can I get my grievances resolved?**

**A:** If you have a problem with your employer, *you need representation*—someone to prepare and present your case. AFSCME gives you that representation. AFSCME also makes sure you get a hearing by establishing a grievance procedure to which management must respond promptly and fairly. When you are part of a strong union, representing the overwhelming majority of workers, the employer has to listen to you.

### **Q: Does AFSCME represent clericals, professionals, and other "white collar" employees?**

**A:** AFSCME represents more than 500,000 clericals, professionals, and other "white collar" employees. In fact, AFSCME represents more "white collar" employees of state and local governments than any other union. AFSCME is a member of the AFL-CIO's Department of Professional Employees.

Further, AFSCME also represents many so-called "new collar" workers—people whose jobs are in some of today's most modern occupations. These workers—data processors, therapists, security personnel, lab technicians, computer programmers, nurses, for instance—often have increasing levels of training, expect to deal with technology on the job, and have special interests that AFSCME speaks for.

### **Q: What does the union do on behalf of its women workers who are concerned about pay equity, women's rights, etc?**

**A:** AFSCME knows that full-time women workers still earn on the average less than two-thirds of what men earn. At least half of this gap is due to the systematic underpayment in jobs that are filled primarily by women. AFSCME is the leader in obtaining pay equity—which means eliminating discrimination in pay for female-dominated jobs. Thousands of AFSCME members have won hundreds of million dollars in pay equity adjustments since 1981.

### **Q: How much are union dues?**

**A:** The amount depends on what you and your fellow workers determine is necessary to provide the union's representational services. The union's dues are set by the local membership and that means you.

### **Q: What does AFSCME know about my job situation?**

**A:** AFSCME negotiates and services more than 3,000 written agreements covering employees of states, cities, counties, towns, colleges and universities, hospitals and other health care facilities, and federal agencies. Employment standards vary from state to state and community to community, but AFSCME is familiar—and experienced—with them all. As its national headquarters, AFSCME has a data bank with information on pay scales, job descriptions, fringe benefits, and contract language covering public and other service employees represented by AFSCME throughout the nation.

**Q: What about the union and the civil service system?**

**A:** If you are a public employee under civil service, when you join the union, you retain all of your civil service rights. The union will work to protect the civil service system, to make it work and to guarantee it is fairly administered. Where strong civil service systems are effectively and fairly administered, AFSCME fights to retain and improve civil service.

**Q: Does the union get involved in politics?**

**A:** Yes. AFSCME's Constitution points out that: "For unions, the workplace and the polling place are inseparable..." Public employees—more than any other group—know that their well-being and the quality of services they perform are strongly affected by who holds public office. AFSCME members have their own independent political organization called PEOPLE—Public Employees Organized to Promote Legislative Equality. PEOPLE Committees of union members at the local, state, and national levels raise funds to work for laws to improve public service and elect politicians responsive to the needs of public employees and health care and social service employees.

**Q: What is the union's structure?**

**A:** As an AFSCME member, you become part of a *local union* consisting of your co-workers in your office, institution, department, or community. AFSCME has more than 3,000 local unions. Each has its own constitution, its own regular membership meetings, and its own elected officers and stewards.

Often the AFSCME local unions within one state, city, or county pool their resources to form a *council*. Councils provide services including contract negotiations, grievance handling, arbitrations, education programs, public relations, and legislative and political action. The AFSCME *International Union*, headquartered in Washington, D.C., represents the members on national issues and provides extensive assistance with bargaining, health and safety matters, among many other services.

**Q: Who runs the union?**

**A:** You do. Every member has a vote in the election of local union officers and board members. Some locals hire staff to provide services to the members. Council and International Union policies are formulated by membership conventions, and every AFSCME member is eligible to serve as a delegate from his or her local union. International Union conventions are held every two years.

**Q: Does having a union mean there will be strikes?**

**A:** No. The national officers and representatives of AFSCME cannot and will not call a strike. That is a decision made locally by you and your fellow workers. There have been cases where AFSCME members have found it necessary to take strike action to achieve dignity on the job, and in every case, the decision was made locally. In *most* cases, a strong, well-organized local will not have to strike. By representing the overwhelming majority of workers, the union can win at the bargaining table rather than on the streets.

**Q: What about public employee associations?**

**A:** AFSCME began as an employee association, the Wisconsin State Employees Association. Now as a national union, AFSCME has the strength and know-how needed to bargain first-rate contracts, win federal aid for state and local governments, and represent public employees effectively. That's why more than 50 independent public employee associations, with more than 400,000 members, have affiliated with AFSCME. In 1988, for example, the 8,000-member Alaska State Employees Association chose AFSCME as their bargaining agent.

(COUNCIL #  
[AFSCME]  
UNION #1234)

**■ IMPORTANT TERMS:**

**Binding arbitration of grievances**

The ruling of a neutral third party designed to settle grievances between the employee or employees and the employer. Final and binding arbitration requires both parties to honor the decision.

**Contract**

A written agreement spelling out wages, hours, and working conditions that must be followed by both the union and employer.

**Grievance**

A procedure to remedy a work-related problem such as the abuse of employee rights or a violation of the contract. Other examples might be a denial of a promotion, an improper transfer, or dismissal without a cause.

**Steward**

A co-worker of yours who represents AFSCME in your workplace and helps you solve your problems on the job, in dealing with management.

**Authorization Card**

A statement signed by an employee authorizing a union to act as his or her agent in collective bargaining. Authorization cards are normally used to request a secret-ballot vote by which AFSCME gets officially certified as the sole bargaining representative for a unit of employees. Such elections are conducted by a public labor relations board.

**Labor Board**

A public agency that oversees collective bargaining, holds union representation elections, and polices unfair labor practices. In addition to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which governs private-sector employers and workers, 22 states have public employment boards, overseeing state and local governments and schools.

