

UNION 101

Get to Know Your Union

Here's a primer for everything you wanted to know about the Green Machine. BY CLYDE WEISS

You're a member of AFSCME, a 1.6-million member union of public service workers at all levels of government and in the private and non-profit sectors. But do you really know AFSCME – its structure, how it operates, or even the jargon you hear in the union hall?

Understanding the basics, especially if you're a new member, will help you become a more effective member of your union. That, in turn, will help make AFSCME an even stronger union to fight for better contracts – and for larger battles against privatization and preserving the social safety net and retirement security for all.

It doesn't take much more than curiosity to start. So let's get started.

AFSCME 101

1. First and foremost, you are a member of your local union. You and your colleagues at work are also members of a bargaining unit (see the accompanying glossary). Most of you work under a union contract or agreement with your employer at either the federal, state or local level of government, or a company or non-profit.
2. Your local is one of more than 3,700 local unions in 47 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Each represents a particular group (such as city workers, or employees at a particular institution or agency). Some locals comprise several bargaining units. Each local has its own constitution and elects its own officers.
3. Locals can be part of an AFSCME council. There are 58 councils, each run by officers

electing representatives of those locals. The councils – plus directly affiliated local unions such as THE Ohio Association of Public School Employees (OAPSE)/AFSCME Local 4, which have their own “sub-locals” – are all part of the national union, headquartered in Washington, DC.

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5. We elect our leaders. Delegates who are elected by their locals and affiliate unions come to AFSCME's biennial convention. Last year, they elected Pres. Lee Saunders and Sec.-Treas. Laura Reyes to set the direction for the national union for the next four years. (Learn more about them on p. 30-31.) The delegates also voted by legislative district to elect representatives of all affiliates in those districts (known as International vice presidents). We also elect officers at every level.

GET INFORMED

In every way, AFSCME is a member-driven union that chooses its causes through membership meetings, by votes of local and council boards, and at AFSCME conventions, where delegates vote on resolutions that are later posted on our website.

A committed activist understands the union – its structure, policies and goals. For young members, the first step on that road is often becoming a member of AFSCME's Next Wave. This network of members, ages 35 and younger, has held two national conferences since 2009. The next conference is scheduled July 2013 (p. 26).

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— Crystal Cote



One of those Next Wavers, Crystal Cote, a 31-year-old revenue agent for Rhode Island Department of Revenue, was encouraged to get involved in her union – Local 2448 (Council 94) – by an active, older co-worker. “She was always telling me, ‘You need to get involved.’” So Cote did.

Cote began attending monthly union meetings, first to “ap-peace” her friend, and then because it was fascinating, she said. “The more I became educated, the more interested I became.”

Knowledge led to activism. She attended a Statehouse rally and saw what a difference it made in achieving the union’s goals. Soon she was asking her local president what more she could do. Six months later, she was invited to sit on the union’s executive board. Now chief steward of her local for more than two years, Cote is anxious to pass on her enthusiasm and knowledge to younger and newer members.

“Talk to veteran union members,” she advised. “They’re the ones who fought hard to get us here. They know what’s happening. You also need to educate yourself. Go to union training sessions, which AFSCME posts all the time.”

STAY INFORMED

AFSCME’s Online Leadership Academy is another good way to learn about your union. It features live webinars and self-paced, interactive classes for leaders, activists, members and staff. For more on the current listing of courses, see p. 29

Stay on top of the latest developments about the union. The magazine you’re now reading – *AFSCME WORKS* – offers news about AFSCME – both locally and nationally. Get updates on breaking news for working families, and take action on issues that matter to you. Just sign up for email updates on AFSCME’s home page, AFSCME.org.

You can stay connected to AFSCME by getting mobile updates on your cell phone. Just text JOIN to 237263.

MAKE A COMMITMENT

Once you’re armed with knowledge about AFSCME and the causes we’re fighting for, you are ready to become a fully activated member of the Green Machine (extra credit: That’s AFSCME’s nickname), the biggest, toughest union in the American labor movement.

But there’s still a critical step to take: participating in the financial source of AFSCME members’ political voice. That’s our political action committee, Public Employees Organized to Promote Legislative Equality (known simply as PEOPLE).

Through your donations, AFSCME fights in the political arena at all levels of government to protect your job, preserve your pension, fight the privatization of your work, and take on the big issues like health care for all.

Become a PEOPLE contributor at the MVP level with just \$2 a week (\$100 a year). Visit AFSCME.org/people. Contributing to PEOPLE is easy! You can give through payroll deduction; or you can give monthly through your checking account, savings account or credit card.

As you build knowledge of AFSCME, and get active, you will create a stronger union. And a stronger union can fight harder for working families.

Email comments to cweiss@afscme.org

KNOW YOUR LOGOS



Network of young members, usually 35 and under



Our fundraising-based political action committee



Our organization for more than 250,000 retiree members

GLOSSARY OF UNION TERMS

Agency Shop, Fair Share and “Right to Work”:

In an agency shop, an employee who is covered by a contract but declines to join the union pays a fee (also known as “fair share”) to help cover what it costs the union to represent her/him in bargaining and other matters – something the union is required

to do for all employees in that shop. When there’s no agency shop in a workplace, some workers known as “free riders” benefit from the union without joining or paying their fair share. So-called right-to-work laws, now in place in 24 states, weaken unions by prohibiting agency shops.

Bargaining Unit: Employees who share a professional interest come together in their union to collectively bargain.

Collective Bargaining: Workers who are members of a bargaining unit negotiate with their employer through their

union representatives over wages, benefits and working conditions.

Grievance and Arbitration: To resolve disputes between an employee and an employer, a union contract or work rules establishes a formal procedure to reach a mutually agreed upon solution. That’s called a grievance. The worker initiates a grievance through the union’s steward, who represents the employees. If the grievance is not resolved, the union may be able to appeal to a professional arbitrator selected jointly by the union and management – a process called grievance

arbitration.

Volunteer Member

Organizer (VMO): These are workers who volunteer to help build the union through organizing. AFSCME’s VMO program trains members to reach out to co-workers and their communities and enroll them in the union. The more members in our ranks, the more we can pull together and stand up for working families. To learn more about volunteer member organizers, and to find out how to become one, visit AFSCME.org/organize.

IN ACCORDANCE WITH FEDERAL LAW, THE PEOPLE COMMITTEE WILL ACCEPT CONTRIBUTIONS ONLY FROM MEMBERS OF AFSCME AND THEIR FAMILIES. CONTRIBUTIONS OR GIFTS TO AFSCME PEOPLE ARE NOT TAX-DEDUCTIBLE AS CHARITABLE CONTRIBUTIONS FOR FEDERAL INCOME TAX PURPOSES.