



ON THE

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# MOVE

Illinois Council 31—American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees—AFL-CIO

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When Disaster Strikes  
"We were so blessed to have them"

## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

# Surrendering democracy without a fight?

*Rauner's sowing cynicism among voters—and that suits him just fine*



BY  
ROBERTA LYNCH

VOTING IS THE  
BEDROCK OF  
DEMOCRACY

**D**id you vote in the recent municipal elections? How about in the last round of state legislative races?

MOST AMERICANS STILL VOTE IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, BUT THAT NUMBER HAS BEEN steadily declining. In 2016, it was just 58.1%. That means more than 40% of eligible voters failed to cast a ballot (and, of course, that doesn't count those who haven't even registered to vote).

And when it comes to local government races, voter participation rates are even more dismal. Despite hotly-contested races in a number of cities and towns across Illinois in early April, voter turnout was shockingly low—often in the range of just 15 or 16%.

What the heck is going on? Are we effectively surrendering our democracy without even making a fight? Because voting, after all, is the bedrock of democracy. If we don't have a say in choosing who our leaders are, then how can we possibly hold them accountable? If those leaders don't believe they can be voted out of office, then why fear popular outrage or protest?

The decline in voting may be the result of social isolation—with too many folks no longer seeing themselves as citizens, but as consumers, focused on the goods we'll buy for ourselves rather than the common "wealth" we share, such as roads, parks and schools.

Or it may be that as denizens of social media, we're prepared to settle for the illusion of democratic participation when our posts or tweets "go viral," stirring up little hornets' nests.

Of course, we know for a fact that there's a systematic effort underway by right-wing forces to legally and operationally suppress voter turnout in certain areas. That's why a number of states have passed laws requiring that voters produce photo ID's at the polling place.

Moreover, there have been numerous instances of "dirty tricks" in which voters receive phone calls or mailings giving them the wrong polling places, voting dates or absentee ballot addresses.

But it seems to me that the most important factor in all of this is one that is easy to miss—a deliberate effort to sow cynicism about and alienation from the political process.

The wealthy elite that have turned their attention to the political arena have figured out that it is actually a lot easier to persuade voters—especially those who might lean Democratic—to stay home than it is to persuade them to support candidates who will clearly act in the interest of that elite.

So increasingly we have elected officials who are actually "elected" by a minority of the electorate—in some cases, a very tiny minority.

Illinois is a painful case in point.

In the 2014 gubernatorial election—the one that brought us Bruce Rauner—voter turnout was actually less than 50%! And recall that Rauner won that race with less than 51% of the vote.

So, in other words, just 25% of the Illinois electorate set our state on the path to the fiscal Armageddon that Bruce Rauner has so zealously pursued—jeopardizing our educational system, our human services and our credit rating.

Then take a look at what happened in the 2016 state legislative races. Republican legislators had voted against a critically important bill intended to help fend off Rauner's attacks on state employees. Democrats, almost unanimously, stood with union members in that fight.

But come election time,

two of the Democrats with the strongest pro-labor voting records—Mike Smiddy and Gary Forby—were defeated, while just about every Republican was re-elected. And turnout in those races was just a little over 65%—with more than a third of voters failing to come to the polls.

If every union member in every one of those districts had cast a ballot, candidates who stood with working families could have carried the day.

No surprise, Bruce Rauner is adept at the perverse art form of voter alienation.

Rauner's millions in campaign contributions largely go to ugly, negative advertising—almost all of it false. His relentless efforts to portray all of "Springfield" as "corrupt" have helped to create a feeling of hopelessness among voters—and it's a feeling that suits him just fine.

With polling numbers down in the basement, Rauner knows there's little enthusiasm for his re-election. The state's been completely paralyzed since he became governor, sinking ever deeper into debt and despair. His best, indeed probably his only, chance of winning is to keep voter turnout in 2018 very, very low. And that's exactly what he's aiming to do.

Rauner's already started his dis-information campaign. So let's start our voter education and motivation program now too.

Let's keep building our PEOPLE program so we can get our message out. Let's reach out to our communities about the importance of defeating Bruce Rauner and putting Illinois on the road to economic growth.

And let's do everything we can to ensure that every union member in Illinois votes in 2018.



## On the Move

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# Health care bills mount

*State's payment backlog jeopardizes baby's lifeline*

**T**he state's group health insurance program is \$4.2 billion dollars in the hole—that will likely grow to \$7 billion if a budget agreement is not reached.

ILLINOIS IS SIMPLY UNABLE TO PAY ITS DEBT TO MEDICAL PROVIDERS BECAUSE GOV. BRUCE RAUNER REFUSES TO DO HIS JOB AND PASS A BUDGET.

The interest owed to vendors alone is at \$400 million and growing. Obviously the backlog is hurtful to the state's financial health, as well as to the doctors and dentists and hospitals that have waited nearly two years to be paid.

But the most alarming aspect is the downright dangerous toll on families.

The state's health plan insures more than 370,000 people, including legislators, employees and retirees of the state and the state university system, and their families. Their health coverage is increasingly precarious despite the fact that

they are insured and the state continues to deduct premiums out of their paychecks twice a month.

## A knock at the door

COUNCIL 31 RECEIVES PHONE calls and emails every week from members and retirees who are being asked to pay up-front and out-of-pocket for care that should be covered and paid for by their insurance. Some employees are being sent to collections agencies, pressured by providers at appointments, or simply not accepted as patients.

Kenea Williams, a member of AFSCME Local 401, testified before the House General Services Appropriations Committee on March 22 to put a human face on the crisis.



Kenea Williams' testimony to House General Services Appropriations Committee brought tears to legislators' eyes.

Testifying directly after Central Management Services, her personal story refuted the CMS director's testimony, which attempted to paper over the problems caused by the lack of a state budget.

Williams is a caregiver for people with disabilities at Murray Developmental Center in Centralia. Her infant son Kobe requires oxygen due to complications from his premature birth—his twin brother Kade is able to breathe on his own.

Late last year, Kobe's home field oxygen system failed. When his mom tried to replace it, the company was no longer accepting the state group health insurance.

"I was stunned," said Williams. "Without the oxygen, Kobe struggles to breathe, his trachea retracts, his ribs retract, and he turns blue struggling to breathe. I fought that day to ensure my son would have the oxygen supplementation he needed."

The company eventually told Williams that she could take a new system home and use it until she found a new supplier who would accept the state insurance.

But on January 10, there

was a knock on the Williams family's front door. The company had come to repossess the oxygen tank that was keeping Kobe alive. Williams was terrified and hid in her home, hoping the company would

field oxygen system that day I do not know if he would be alive with us today," Williams said. As it is, Kobe has his oxygen after his mom found a new supplier—but with no budget in sight, his future is still at risk.

## Governor, do your job

"I PAY MY GROUP HEALTH insurance premiums every week as required under the AFSCME contract, but Governor Rauner is refusing to keep up his end of the bargain," Williams told the legislators.

"Without the state's contributions to the group health insurance program, Kobe's life and the lives of many other families in Illinois will depend upon the good will of medical suppliers and providers. That is no way to run a state."

At one point in her testimony, Kenea Williams's voice broke with emotion. Some legislators lowered and shook their heads as another wiped away tears.

"The governor should do his job," she said in conclusion. "Pass a budget negotiated with the General Assembly and negotiate a fair contract with AFSCME."

**"I pay my group health insurance premiums, but Governor Rauner is refusing to keep up his end of the bargain."**

leave and she could continue searching for a new supplier. But instead, the company called the police.

The Sheriff's police knocked on the door. "I pleaded with the officers not to take away my son's life-sustaining oxygen supply," Williams recounted. The deputies listened to her plea and refused to repossess the equipment.

"If Kobe had lost the home



Twins Kade and Kobe (right) were born premature. Kobe still needs oxygen to breathe.

# Courts rule against Rauner

*AFSCME continues the legal fight for fairness*

**N**ow that AFSCME's contract dispute with Bruce Rauner is in the state court system, the governor isn't faring too well.

RAUNER HAS DONE EVERYTHING IN HIS POWER TO IMMEDIATELY IMPOSE HIS TERMS ON the state employees he has refused to negotiate with for more than a year.

He wants to double employee costs for health—while also freezing their wages for four years—and put an end to safeguards against irresponsible privatization schemes, jeopardizing thousands of jobs.

The Illinois Labor Relations Board, appointed by Rauner, backed up his claim that negotiations are at an impasse. The union then appealed to the state appellate court and requested a stay of the Labor Board's ruling.

## Rauner cannot impose terms

ON MARCH 3 THE FOURTH District Appellate Court granted AFSCME Council 31's request to put the ILRB ruling on hold until the union's appeal is decided.

As a result, Rauner cannot move forward with his plan to impose his terms on state employees.

"This decision is in the best interest of all the people of Illinois, both public service workers and the millions of Illinoisans who rely on their important work," AFSCME Council 31 Executive Director Roberta Lynch said.

Lynch pointed out that

rather than lengthy court proceedings, the best course would be for the governor to work constructively to reach a fair contract settlement at the bargaining table.

"We strongly urge Governor Rauner to join us in the spirit of compromise and return to bargaining to reach an agreement that is truly fair to all."

## Rauner denied expedited appeal

INSTEAD RAUNER DECIDED TO keep fighting to immediately impose his terms. So, based on a web of lies, Rauner's high-paid contract law firm urged the Illinois Supreme Court to bypass the appellate court process entirely and directly take up AFSCME's appeal of the labor board's impasse ruling, lifting the stay that the appellate court had issued.

On April 2, the Supreme Court denied that request.

This rebuff is likely particularly hard on the governor because the appellate court's refusal to allow Rauner to

**"Governor Rauner should stop wasting time and money on costly court fights and instead do his own job."**

impose his demands is predicated on what it called a "reasonable likelihood" that AFSCME will prevail on appeal.

"AFSCME members are public service workers who do their jobs every day, protecting kids, keeping us safe, helping veterans and the disabled and much more," Lynch said.

"Governor Rauner should stop wasting time and money on costly court fights and instead do his own job, working constructively to find common

ground."

The union's appeal of the labor board ruling will now be heard in the Fourth District Appellate Court according to the schedule it has established. Oral arguments in the case are scheduled for August.

The provisions of the union contract remain in effect during this time, pursuant to the "Tolling Agreement" between AFSCME and the Rauner Administration.

## STATE PAYCHECKS TO CONTINUE

The Illinois Supreme Court refused to grant Attorney General Lisa Madigan's request for direct appeal of the Temporary Restraining Order that AFSCME and other unions won to ensure that state employees are paid during the current budget standoff.

In February, the St. Clair County Circuit Court that issued the TRO rejected the AG's motion to dissolve it. Rather than appealing that decision in state appellate court per the normal judicial procedures, AG Madigan sought a direct appeal to the Supreme Court, which would have allowed for a speedier final resolution—and, if she had won her case, for a speedier cut-off of state employee paychecks.

But now paychecks will continue while the case makes its way through the legal system, next to the Fifth District Appellate Court, and then—if AFSCME prevails before the Appellate Court and if the AG continues to appeal—to the Illinois Supreme Court.

Because the issue on appeal is whether the TRO should be dissolved—not the merits of the case itself—these proceedings will be relatively swift.

## LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

### Bills to watch

#### SUPPORT: \$15 for DSPs

HB 2960, sponsored by Rep. Robyn Gabel, and SB 955, sponsored by Sen. Heather Steans, are on the floor and ready for a vote. The legislation would increase pay for Direct Service Personnel at state-funded agencies providing disability services.

#### SUPPORT: State Employee Pay

HB 1798, sponsored by Rep. Sue Scherer, is currently on the floor of the House. The measure would ensure that state employee paychecks continue despite the ongoing budget standoff.

#### SUPPORT: Taxpayer Accountability

SB 1653, sponsored by Sen. Andy Manar, and HB 3216, sponsored by Rep. Litesa Wallace, passed out of committee with bipartisan support. The legislation aims to prevent the state from privatizing services currently performed by state employees without first meeting rigorous requirements.

#### SUPPORT: Hardin County Work Camp

HB 499, sponsored by Rep. Brandon Phelps, would reopen the Hardin County Work Camp located in Cave-in-Rock. Inmates at Hardin filled their time productively, learned skills

and earned money. Engaging inmates in work-related programs have proven effective at reducing recidivism.

#### OPPOSE: State Employee Mileage Rate

HB 1807, sponsored by Rep. Mark Batinick, is in committee. The bill seeks to allow CMS and the governor to dictate mileage reimbursement rates for state employees who are required to travel for state business, replacing the standard use of the IRS federal reimbursement rate.

# Growing chorus calls on Gov. Rauner to negotiate

*More than halfway through his term, governor failing to do his job*

State workers are frustrated with Gov. Bruce Rauner as their repeated efforts to compromise are met with rebuff after rebuff—and their communities share that frustration.

ARACELY TIRADO IS A VETERAN OF THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE AND AN EMPLOYEE AT the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

"I'm so frustrated that the governor refuses to bargain," Tirado told reporters at a March news conference. "He walked out. He just wants to impose his terms without any understanding of what impact it would have on state employees and on our families. Or perhaps, he just doesn't care."

**"Inflicting harm on Illinois communities is morally wrong."**

Tirado emphasized that her family depends on her job. She and her husband budget carefully to make sure they can provide a better future for their four children and Rauner's demands of a four-year wage freeze coupled with doubled health care costs would jeopardize that future.

"I know how the governor wants everyone to believe that state employees all make the big bucks, but it's just not true. We don't. Let's get real. The pay cut would hurt me and my family."

Samia Miles works for the Illinois Department of Human Services, whose mission is to reduce poverty and help individuals and families get the services they need. She worries about the impact of Rauner's contract demands far beyond the thousands of employees.

"He wants a blank check to privatize anything at any time without any accountability," Miles said. "I believe in standing up for a fair contract not only for myself but my community."

## Protesters to Rauner, "Do your job!"

COMMUNITIES AND ORGANIZATIONS across the state have taken up the fight of state workers like Tirado and families who depend on state services.

"Inflicting harm on Illinois communities is morally wrong," said Rev. C.J. Hawking of Arise Chicago, a faith-based coalition that fights for workers' rights. "The vast majority of people in Illinois value state workers. We know our lives work because you work, and we thank you."

Protests have sprung up across the state at events where Rauner is scheduled to speak.

From Columbia to Alton to Peoria to Chicago, hundreds have gathered to greet Rauner as he arrives at big money fundraisers. They didn't buy tickets—they were there to tell Rauner to do his job, negotiate with state workers and sign a budget.

Protesters include members of AFSCME and many other unions, elected officials, progressive political groups, community organizations, as well as public school and state university teachers, students and parents.

Public anger from a lack of funding for services and education is aimed directly at



Protesters in Chicago (top) and Alton called on Rauner to do his job—pass a budget and negotiate fair contracts with union employees.

Rauner.

"We've never had the experience where funding for students or higher education has

simply been denied for political purposes," said Tim Barnett, an NEIU professor, at a recent protest at the university.

"That is brand new and that is Governor Rauner."

## Chicago City Council rings the alarm

THE CHICAGO CITY COUNCIL overwhelmingly approved a resolution on March 29, calling on Rauner to return to the bargaining table with state workers and their unions.

"We are not blind to the fact we have no power to compel Governor Rauner to act to do the right thing," said 15th Ward Alderman Raymond Lopez. "But that doesn't mean

that we as a city, as a collective, can't continue to fight against the winds that he tries to bring, the winds of disorder and chaos and forced crises that are impacting ... communities that are most vulnerable."

"I'm standing here because I believe this is right for our community and the most vulnerable people out there ... the kids that state workers protect every day," Alderman Howard Brookins said. "We are asking him to negotiate in good faith so our communities can begin healing."

"I hope this is a wakeup call," Brookins said. "And if Governor Rauner doesn't answer, we're going to continue ringing the alarm."



Samia Miles speaks at a news conference about Rauner's refusal to negotiate.

# City of Chicago employees set to bargain

Six AFSCME local unions representing City of Chicago employees are set to begin bargaining with the Emanuel Administration.



AND WITH THE CITY OF CHICAGO'S SEVERE FISCAL PROBLEMS IT'S GOING TO TAKE THE involvement of all 3,700 AFSCME members in city government standing firmly united to win a fair contract.

AFSCME members work in nearly every city department, including libraries, police, transportation, health, aviation, law, water, family support, animal care, finance and more.

"City of Chicago employees are critical to the functioning of the city and the well-being of its people," AFSCME Council 31 Associate Director Claudia Roberson said. "We make Chicago work."

Members are circulating bargaining surveys to prioritize contract proposals and electing

their Bargaining Committee members. The Bargaining Committee will meet in May to finalize proposals to be made to Management.

#### Pensions at risk

THE CITY OF CHICAGO PENSION fund in which AFSCME members participate—the MEABF—faces a severe funding shortfall. At only 40 percent funded, it's in danger of going bankrupt in less than a decade.

Vowing to change that situation, Mayor Rahm Emanuel took on the tough task of enacting an increase in the water and sewer tax levies to provide a dedicated source of revenue for the fund.

Pursuant to the victory that



## Retiring Soon?

Don't Just Sit Back...

Join AFSCME Chapter 31 Retirees!

We worked hard to earn a decent retirement. Join AFSCME Chapter 31 Retirees and help protect it.

Retirement security is under attack on multiple fronts—at the local, state and national levels. AFSCME is fighting back to defend pension benefits, Social Security and Medicare—the bedrocks of a secure retirement.

AFSCME Chapter 31 Retirees brings retired public employees together, providing vital information and activities. Chapter 31 has more than 30 sub-chapters that meet monthly and form a statewide network of over 26,000 members. It's the largest organization of public-sector retirees in the state.

We can't take anything for granted... our work isn't over.

Visit [afscme31.org/retirees/join](http://afscme31.org/retirees/join) for more information.

AFSCME and other unions won at the Illinois Supreme Court, the pensions of current employees cannot be diminished.

tration introduced legislation in Springfield to further stabilize the fund by increasing the contributions from all employees

than Tier 2 participants (those hired after January 1, 2011), bringing the new contribution level to 11.5 percent.

AFSCME's input on the legislation resulted in a provision requiring that the Tier 3 contribution be lowered when the MEABF reaches a stable level of funding.

After passing both houses of the General Assembly in January, Gov. Bruce Rauner promptly vetoed the legislation.

"Rauner said the bill doesn't truly reform the Chicago pension system," said Roberson. "But what Rauner means by 'reform' is finding a way to cut the pension benefits of current employees."

"City of Chicago employees are critical to the functioning of the city and the well-being of its people."

However, the law does allow for changes to the benefits of new hires.

After months of discussions with AFSCME and other unions, the Emanuel adminis-

hired after the act becomes effective.

The mayor's plan for new hires creates a new Tier 3 pension level that requires payment of three percentage points more

# Every vote counts in local elections

*A mixed bag of wins and losses marks April Election Day*

From school boards to mayoral races to referenda, AFSCME members worked for candidates and issues that will impact working families in Illinois for years to come in this year's local government elections.

## Rockford starts a new chapter

TOM McNAMARA IS ROCKFORD'S new mayor. The AFSCME-endorsed candidate won by a landslide, garnering nearly 70 percent of the vote.

At his victory party, McNamara thanked his supporters and volunteers who he said knocked on 40,000 doors and made 30,000 phone calls. Some of those volunteers were AFSCME members like Ashley Smith.

"I heard they needed help so I decided to try it out," Smith said, who spent most of her volunteer hours making calls to get out the vote. "I started talking to people and I kind of liked it! I wanted to do more so I jumped in."

Rockford is starting a new chapter. Mayor McNamara will be joined by many new faces on the Rockford City Council, which has shifted from majority Republican to majority Democrat.

Three of those new city aldermen were supported by AFSCME. Karen Hoffman won her 8th Ward seat in the primary. Jonathan Logemann (2nd Ward) and William Rose (9th Ward) are both educators who spoke out in support of the striking Rockford school employees in March.

Rockford school employees and their supporters took their campaign for fair wages to the polls. AFSCME supported two new school board candidates to shake up a board that is denying fair pay to bus drivers, paraprofessionals and nutrition services workers.

Kimberly Haley ran and lost in a tough district, but managed to get 44 percent of the vote.

"Kimberly Haley ran an impressive campaign and she has potential to be a great leader," said Jason Kay, political director for AFSCME Council

31. "We stand ready to help her in any future endeavors."

In a difficult write-in race, AFSCME-backed Dr. Brandi Brown won a school board seat by just five votes. Brown thanked AFSCME particularly for playing an important role in her victory.

"Thank you AFSCME Council 31 for your endorsement," Brown said in a letter. "Your support helped to make a difference in this campaign."

## Aurora elects first African-American mayor

AFSCME ENDORSED RICHARD Irvin for mayor of Aurora in the general election—and he won by just 170 votes.

Irvin's mother was an AFSCME member and he pledged to support workers' rights to collective bargaining and to work cooperatively with city employees as mayor.

Irvin will move from his role as alderman to the city's first African-American mayor in May.

## Champaign County Nursing Home at risk

TWO REFERENDA THAT STOOD to protect the Champaign County Nursing Home from closure lost at the polls. Voters rejected a tax levy increase to help keep the nursing home open and voted yes to sell or dispose of

the home if necessary.

"Our county nursing home has many long-term employees who will continue to put quality of care for residents first," said

## Wins and losses

IN THE QUAD CITIES, AFSCME-backed Andy Rowe lost his bid for mayor of Rock Island while

**"If we can mobilize statewide, we will be unstoppable in 2018."**

Michael Wilmore, AFSCME Council 31 Staff Representative. "We ask the County Board to do the same as it makes these difficult decisions."

The referenda are advisory only, not binding, Kay said. "We are going to keep fighting to keep the nursing home public."

AFSCME-supported Ivory Clark (1st Ward) and James Spurgetis (3rd Ward) won their races for Rock Island City Council.

Gary Rowe, one of the four AFSCME-supported school board candidates, won his bid for Rock Island School Board. Two of the union's three endorsed candidates for Moline School Board won: Andy Waeyaert and Erin Waldron-Smith.

In Bolingbrook, challenger Jackie Traynere, an AFGE staff member and Will County Board member who stood up for striking AFSCME members, lost her bid for mayor by only about 100 votes. An amazing accomplishment considering her opponent, Roger Claar, has been in office more than 30 years.

And Rita Ali won her race for alderman of the 5th Ward in Peoria with AFSCME's support.

## Looking to 2018

"ALTHOUGH WE LOST SOME OF our fights, we had a hand in some important victories," said Kay. "The number one takeaway is that every vote counts, and we'll need to work even harder in 2018."

"Our victory in Rockford was realized only through unprecedented community mobilization," said Steve Booth of Winnebago County's AFSCME Local 473. "AFSCME members, many fresh off the picket line, were out in force, knocking on doors and making calls to voters."

"People power won back Rockford, just like People Power must win back Illinois and cast Rauner out of the State House. If we can mobilize statewide like we did in Rockford this March, we will be unstoppable in 2018."



Ashley Smith, president of AFSCME Local 1275, calls voters in Rockford on Election Day.

# Anatomy of a Storm

A giant storm ripped through Illinois the night of February 28. The damage was greatest in LaSalle County but reached all the way up to the Chicago suburbs.

Multiple tornadoes, large hail, strong winds and heavy rain killed two people and injured dozens. Homes were destroyed. Communities spent weeks dealing with the debris and damage.

AFSCME members were there in force. Whether they were on the job or volunteering their time to help their neighbors, AFSCME members did not quit until all the work was done.

“Volunteers walked through the neighborhoods asking people if they needed help. Even AFSCME members who had their own homes destroyed were out there helping their neighbors,” said Nick Krisman, President of Local 472 at Sheridan Correctional Center.

“I was greatly impressed and appreciative of the way our members represented all of us.”

## THE VOLUNTEER ORGANIZER

**Bonnie Witalka**

LaSalle County Deputy Court Clerk

I sent out a mass email asking for volunteers to contacts I've built for 15 years. The word spread on Facebook. I wanted to do something to help and everybody that showed up wanted to do something to help too.

I had no idea who was going to join us, but we had an overwhelming turnout.

People from all walks of life were there. A circuit court judge was on his hands and knees, picking stuff up. A couple attorneys from the Chicago suburbs came and brought chainsaws. Teachers joined in, members from other unions, and of course AFSCME members—from the nursing home, the probation department, the City of Ottawa, the courts—and they brought their families too.

It was a lot of fun because you got to see the change we made for people. We didn't think we could do some of the stuff we did, but we did. Thirty people would swamp a yard full of debris and clear it in just an hour.

We removed an entire garage from one woman's property. She said, 'Thank you. There is no way we could ever have done that.'

Well over 20 people from our local lost their homes or had property destroyed. We set up a fund, raised money for them, and our local is going to disperse monetary donations to help them out based on a committee's recommendation.

We just wanted to do something to say: We're here for you and we want you to know we care.

## THE COMFORTER

**Amanda Waddell**

LaSalle County Nursing Home  
Restorative Aide

The night of the tornado our staff was amazing. They kept the 68 residents safe, comfortable and calm. As scared as they were, they kept their composure and didn't let our residents feel that fear. They did a great job.

Our staff is very well trained for an emergency. We do regular drills for evacuations, tornados and fires. And we take that training very seriously.

It was minutes from the tornado siren to when the storm hit. It was around dinner time so staff were getting all the residents ready for dinner. They quickly got everyone to the residential quarters,

**“We could not thank them enough. We were so blessed to have them here. It nice to know that in this cruel world there are still great people out there.”**

**- TINA LAWRY, STORM VICTIM**

shut all the doors to the rooms and the residents sat in the hallways.

Nobody was left alone. Staff kept everyone happy, singing with them and telling jokes to keep their mind off what happened. It was hard but they knew the importance of keeping their calm.

The damage was extensive to the roof and windows. Trees were down. The home was not leveled, but it was bad enough that residents couldn't stay there anymore. Thank goodness there were no serious injuries.

I wasn't working during the tornado, but I came back afterward to help with the evacuation. Staff that had been there since dawn stayed on past midnight until all the residents were safely transported to secure facilities. Now they are displaced and anxiously waiting to get back home.

Our CNAs, nurses and activity aides have been going out to the other facilities to visit with the residents, to see how they are and ask if they need anything. In the meantime, we're cleaning. We need to sterilize all our machines to get ready for the day the residents can come back.

The dedication of our AFSCME employees is just absolutely phenomenal. The people that were working that night deserve applause and recognition.

Everyone worked together. Nobody had to ask what to do; they just knew what to do.

## THE EMERGENCY RESPONDER

**Joel Smith**

Ottawa 911 Center Telecommunicator

The 911 dispatchers on duty during the tornado did an exceptional job under extreme conditions.

Our center received hundreds upon hundreds of calls for help. We were in constant communication with the public works teams, helping coordinate what we could. And we also housed and dispersed all the donations of food and supplies.

Our number one job was keeping residents and first responders safe.

For three or four days there was no power. There were a ton of trees down and most of the roads were impassable. We needed to get utility companies in there to restore power, but to get to the power lines we had to get the roads open.

Many of our members are public works employees. They were working around the clock, up to 20-hour days. We closed an entire park to fill it with the trees, branches and debris that they cleared.

The work of our members showed tremendous outpouring of dedication to what we do. I'm proud to be an AFSCME member. It was horrific, but now we know we can come together to get through a tough time like this in our city.





# Losing a co-worker

*Grieving members reach out to PSP for help*

**B**enito Bernardo worked for nearly 20 years at the Elgin Mental Health Center, providing a safe environment for the patients in the forensics unit.

AFTER BATTLING ILLNESS AND AN INJURY, BENITO HAD COME TO WORK TO COLLECT HIS workers' compensation paperwork. But on his way into the building, he fell and suffered a fatal blow to the head.

"Everybody was coming to me upset and I didn't know how to respond," said Beverly Ivy, a long-time co-worker of Benito's and a fellow Security Therapy Aide.

"So I reached out to my union representative and a counselor from the Personal Support Program came out to the facility that very night."

## Coping with loss

DURING A CRISIS LIKE THIS, AFSCME's Personal Support Program (PSP) can be a critical resource. Facilitated grief workshops help members cope with shock, mourning and loss.

"We talked about how Benito affected them, what he was like, what did they learn from him," counselor John Thomas said. "My job is to facilitate this sharing process and help members tie the loss back to their own life. We brought it back to a goal: How can they become a better person because they knew Benito?"

Counselors from PSP are often called to deal with a death, but they also address the members' broader feelings about loss. Many members are dealing with personal issues at home, the loss of a loved one, a major change in their lives. A tragedy at work can bring up a lot of emotions and distress.

Learning about the stages of grief helps members have the language and tools to process the loss.

"We also take a look at our own mortality together," said Thomas. "Are we satisfied with our lives, are we doing everything in our power to take care of ourselves?"

## Support in crisis

IVY BELIEVES THE PROCESS was beneficial to employees who were close to Benito. "We all were upset and shocked," she said, "but we also had a lot of staff who had been losing family members lately. A retired co-worker was on life support in the hospital. It was a very diffi-

During a crisis, the Personal Support Program can be a critical resource for AFSCME members.

cult time."

Benito's co-workers felt like friends to him, his wife said. He loved coming to work. He never called in; he always made it to the job.

"Patients liked him. He was quiet, but respected," Ivy said. "He was just a really good guy."

After the workshop, Thomas welcomed everyone to contact PSP to talk more about their loss one-on-one with a counselor.

"Our services are free and we encourage members to take

advantage of that," Thomas said. "We also offer workshops on financial problems, anger and stress. At the request of local unions, we can design workshops based on what members need."

The Personal Support Program (PSP) provides short-term counseling, as well as referral services for AFSCME-represented employees and their dependents who are struggling with personal problems or difficulties at work.

AFSCME seeks to provide access to its services at no cost to employees through inclusion of the program as an employee benefit in collective bargaining agreements.

*Employees currently eligible for this benefit pursuant to their union contract include those who work for the City of Chicago, Cook County, the State of Illinois, Village of Round Lake Beach, Village of Fox Lake, Village of Homewood, City of Markham, Egyptian County Health Department, Jackson County, Randolph County, City of Pana, and Sangamon County.*

# Family history inspires labor leader

**D**avid Strell is the new president of AFSCME Local 2467. He tells the story of how his grandfather's life informs and inspires his union activism.

"MY GRANDFATHER WAS A UNION MINE ORGANIZER DURING THE INFAMOUS Colorado labor wars of the first two decades of the 20th century.

These wars pitted John D. Rockefeller and other corporate giants against the newly

formed United Mine Workers of America.

In retribution for the audacity of 1,200 miners going out on strike, dozens of women and children were burned alive in their company tent homes by Rockefeller's henchmen.

The Ludlow massacre led to an armed uprising by the miners in which over 200 miners lost their lives.

The Ludlow massacre was a watershed moment in the American labor movement. It is often referred to in history books as the most violent strike between corporate power and workers' rights in our nation's history and was played out over two decades.

It was against this background that my grandfather left Colorado and moved his family to Illinois to seek work.

My father was the youngest of six sons. He and his brothers were never allowed to forget the difference between men of great wealth and those

who toiled for a living. In fact, the name Rockefeller was prohibited from even being mentioned in their household.

It is probably because of my family's history and this story told by his sons of those days that I decided to run for president of my AFSCME Local 2467.

It is amazing to me that over 100 years later we are once again facing the consequences of the struggle between corporate power and the interests of working men and women.

Sometimes it's easy to forget the sacrifices of men like my grandfather and the blood sweat and tears of men and women who truly sacrificed to

make America great.

So let's not make the same mistakes today. Let's not believe that our governor's agenda—and his disregard for the working men and women of Illinois—cannot get any worse.

We only have to look north to our labor friends in the progressive state of Wisconsin to see how corporate power and wealth can cripple the union movement in a relatively short period of time.

Let's pledge not to forget the sacrifices of those who went before us and say:

That is not going to happen in Illinois. Let's work together. Let's be strong, committed, and united."

# Bent on destroying unions

*Wealthy special interests turn to courts to strip workers' rights*



**C**orporate and right-wing special interest groups representing a wealthy elite are ramping up their assault on collective bargaining rights.

WITH BACKING FROM THE NATIONAL RIGHT TO WORK LEGAL DEFENSE FUND AND other anti-union forces, a number of lawsuits seeking to outlaw Fair Share fees and require unions to represent employees who won't contribute toward the cost of representation have been working their way

right-leaning Supreme Court is likely to hear arguments in a similar case—Janus v. AFSCME Council 31—a lawsuit originally initiated by none other than Illinois' governor, Bruce Rauner.

When Rauner took legal action to ban fair share fees in state government, the courts

**The fact that workers have a voice on the job with their unions is something that galls the ultra-rich.**

through the courts in a steady stream.

The most recent example is Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association, which the U.S. Supreme Court rejected by default in a 4-4 decision after the untimely death of Justice Antonin Scalia.

Now the soon-to-be

said he had no standing to bring such a case. So he and his big money allies found state employees to bring the lawsuit for them.

The Janus case and the Friedrichs case are nearly identical. Both argue that there is no line in the public sector between political and non-po-

litical activity for unions.

This argument has found a lot of support from the more conservative side of the bench. That's one of the big reasons why Senate Republicans took the unprecedented step of refusing to even give a hearing to President Obama's Supreme Court nominee last year.

And now that President Donald Trump's Supreme Court nominee, Neil Gorsuch, has been confirmed, the court will tip toward that conservative line of thinking.

The fact that workers have a voice on the job with their unions is something that galls the ultra-rich conservative clan. Because when workers join together they can ensure safe working conditions and improve their wages and benefits—taking away from the power of those at the top.

Unions are one of the only proven tools to achieve a fair economy for all Americans, not just the wealthy. And if anti-worker crusaders win, unions will face financial starvation and eventually elimination.

"Our economy is out of balance, manipulated to benefit those who are already wealthy, and this case could make it even worse," said AFSCME President Lee Saunders.

## New Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch will tilt court toward corporations and against working people.

AFSCME members get up to go to work every day to help our communities. We know how much our neighbors depend on the services we provide.

At the end of the day, the hard work we put into our communities is about people.

Judge Neil Gorsuch, Donald Trump's confirmed nominee for the United States Supreme Court, just doesn't share our values.

For starters, he believes corporations are people.

Time after time, Judge Gorsuch has put company profits over the well-being and safety of workers—even in life and death scenarios.

In *Compass Environmental, Inc. v. OSHRC*, the majority held that the employer must pay a fine for disregarding an internal policy and failing to train a worker who was electrocuted to death by high-voltage lines located near his work area. Judge Gorsuch issued a dissent and voted to throw the case out of court because he didn't believe the employer was negligent.

As a federal judge, Neil Gorsuch supported a case that ruled corporations are "persons" and therefore could deny vital health care coverage to the company's employees based on the corporate owners' personal religious views.

In another case, Gorsuch ruled that a truck driver whose life was in danger while stranded in subzero temperatures could be fired because he disobeyed his employer's order to stay put despite life-threatening conditions.

Before he was a judge, Gorsuch argued that it should be harder for regular people to band together to hold Wall Street and huge corporations accountable for fraud and other wrongdoing.

These are just some examples of how Neil Gorsuch will further tilt the scales of justice against working people.

Confirmed by the U.S. Senate on April 7, Justice Gorsuch will serve on the United States Supreme Court for the rest of his life. There is no going back. Donald Trump ran on a promise to lift up the forgotten man and woman, but his Supreme Court pick believes that the rights of corporations and Wall Street supersede the rights of everyday people.

# RETIREE NOTES



AFSCME Retirees Sub-chapter 85 of Centralia



AFSCME Retirees Sub-chapter 74 of Rockford

## Retiree activism helps save ACA

ON FRIDAY, MARCH 25, CONGRESS pulled the bill repealing and replacing the Affordable Care Act (ACA) moments before it was scheduled for a vote.

AFSCME Retirees across the state have been calling legislative offices and participating in actions to stop the repeal and replacement of the ACA. Repealing the health care law initiated by President Barack Obama

would have had severe and widespread financial impact.

“Many families are paid minimum wage, while working one, two or more part-time jobs. They don’t receive health insurance from their employers,” said Sub-chapter 91 President Al Latoza. “If not for ACA, they would have no health insurance at all for themselves or their children. Retirees would not get free preventative checkups. Getting rid of this act would have negatively affected all ages.”

Replacement language

within the repeal bill would have removed premium caps for older individuals—insurance premiums could skyrocket up to five times as much as a younger person was to pay for the same care. The replacement legislation also cuts federal funding of Medicaid by \$560 billion in 10 years, cutting assistance for 70 million seniors who depend on nursing home and home care services.

AFSCME Retirees worked tirelessly to halt the legislation and their activism paid off when the harmful bill was pulled from the House floor before a vote.

“The activists of AFSCME Retiree Sub-chapter 163 made their voices heard emphatically by phone calls to all United States Senators and Representatives, in and outside of their respective districts,” said

of the dispute as to whether AFSCME and the administration were at impasse when Rauner walked away from contract negotiations more than a year ago.

The Supreme Court’s ruling means that the stay issued by the Fourth District Appellate Court will remain in place while the case is heard.

“This ruling is very exciting for AFSCME Retirees,” said Liam McDonnell, member of Sub-chapter 86.

“Now Rauner can’t impose harmful cuts to retiree health care, like removing language that sets premium benefit levels and doubles premiums for non-Medicare eligible dependents.”

## One dangerous budget

ON MARCH 16, PRESIDENT Trump released his proposed federal budget which includes crippling cuts to programs of vital importance to seniors.

Cuts in the Budget Proposal include:

- Meals on Wheels: Last year Meals on Wheels served 2.4 million Americans. The program provides meals to seniors who are not easily able to shop or cook for themselves. Meals on Wheels receive 35 percent of its funding through the Older Americans Act, which is administered by the United States Department of Health and Human Services. Trump’s budget would slash the Department of Health and Human Services budget by 17 percent, jeopardizing this and other vital programs.
- Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP): Trump’s budget would eliminate LIHEAP completely, a program that provides short term financial assistance to 6.7 million seniors struggling to pay cooling and heating bills.

AFSCME will continue to fight for programs that protect seniors and against budgets that would undermine their financial security.

Sub-chapter 163 President Clyde Wilson. “We identify with ‘People Power’ and we’re a force that has to be dealt with.”

## Pension-cutting bills

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY IS once again crafting legislation that will cut pensions.

Under pressure from Gov. Bruce Rauner, Democratic and Republican leadership in the Illinois Senate tried to push through legislation that would cut the pensions of working employees in the SERS, SURS and TRS pension systems.

The governor is refusing to agree to work toward resolving the state’s budget stalemate unless pensions are cut.

Senate Bill 16 would cut the pensions of active employees, and includes a plan to try to push employees out of the pension system and into 401(k)s. That would undermine the financial integrity of our state’s already severely-underfunded pension systems. SB 16 failed on the Senate floor on February 28 by a vote of 26-27-2 and was put on postponed consideration. It is likely to be considered again.

AFSCME, along with the We are One Coalition, is committed to fighting harmful pension legislation.

## Stay remains

THE ILLINOIS SUPREME COURT denied the Rauner administration’s request for direct appeal

AFSCME Retirees worked tirelessly to halt the legislation and their activism paid off.

# Turmoil in IDOC

*Rauner, Department of Corrections continue in wrong direction*

## Rauner tries to privatize prison workers

WITHIN DAYS OF ONE ANOTHER THIS MARCH, GOV. RAUNER ANNOUNCED TWO MOVES THAT would undermine operations of the Illinois prison system—a plan to replace employees in prison watch towers with closed-circuit cameras; and his scheme to fire 124 state nurses so he can privatize their jobs.

The governor's office said the move to replace officers with cameras at 23 minimum- and maximum-security facilities would save \$4 million a year and would result in no layoffs.

AFSCME Council 31 Regional Director Eddie Caumiant said the action blatantly puts money over staff, inmate and community safety. "There's a whole range of things that a tower person can do," Caumiant said. "They can see very clearly exactly what's going on in a situation in the yard, they can anticipate what will happen and they can see things that are out of range of the officers on the ground."

The John Howard Association, a prison watch dog organization, agrees with the

union's assessment of the dangers.

"It's hard to understand how the cameras can be as effective when, of course, they can't respond or react to movement or behavior or incidents or escalation," spokesperson Jennifer Vollen-Katz said. "Cameras can't intervene, they can't de-escalate."

The Rauner Administration's plan to replace more than 100 prison nurses who are members of the Illinois Nurses Association (INA) with contract nurses by June 15 is more about retribution than effective operations.

INA Executive Director Alice Johnson said the layoffs are an attempt by the governor to "bully and intimidate" union members for rejecting Rauner's

contract terms last year—terms similar to those the governor is trying to impose on AFSCME members.

Jamie Peterson, a nurse at

**“Cameras can't intervene, they can't de-escalate.”**

the Vienna Correctional Center told TV reporters that she received her pink slip the day of her granddaughter's birthday party. She is only two years away from retirement.

"You plan your whole

life—you know, things that we had planned to do after our retirement—I will have to work a lot longer now and drive further to fulfill our hopes," Peterson said.

Rauner has also threatened to lay off over 100 AFSCME members in health-related titles in IDOC.

AFSCME has joined with INA in an intensive lobbying effort to once again pass legislation that would bar privatization of any current health care positions in DOC. SB 19 has already passed both houses and gone to the governor's desk. He vetoed a similar measure last year, so an intensive grassroots lobbying effort will be needed to build sufficient support to override his veto this time.

## Pontiac Correctional Center employees protest unsafe conditions

FOLLOWING YET ANOTHER INMATE ATTACK ON STAFF AT THE MAXIMUM-SECURITY Pontiac Correctional Center—where an officer was stabbed in the head by an inmate with a crudely made shank—the members of AFSCME Local 494 demonstrated outside the facility on March 15.

Council 31 Executive Director Roberta Lynch joined local union members who work in the correctional center to raise awareness of inmate assaults on staff and lay out specific steps that can make the facility safer for both employees and inmates.

"This is a dangerous job, but the Department of Corrections is making it more dangerous, putting employees' safety at risk," Lynch told reporters. "The department is making changes in policy without talking to employees and without taking safety into account."

Data shows that Pontiac has by far the highest rate of assaults on staff of any state prison, and it's getting worse. Such incidents increased 50 percent in 2016 compared to the previous year. In addition to housing the system's most violent population, one in six

Pontiac inmates is classified as seriously mentally ill.

AFSCME proposes several steps to help improve safety at Pontiac for employees and inmates alike. The most important is to get feedback from staff when making policy decisions.

"The officers that deal with these inmates every day know who's more dangerous, they know who's more violent, and they should be consulted," Lynch said.

### Union proposals to improve safety:

- **More communication with staff.** The input and perspective of security employees should be included when decisions affecting security are made.
- **Gradually step down inmates** from long-term separation from the general population. Allow for careful readjustment and transition when reintegrating inmates, doing so slowly with gradual increases in interaction.
- **Add mental health staff,** including more psychiatrists and other higher-level clini-



Members of AFSCME Local 494 protested unsafe working conditions at Pontiac Correctional Center.

cians. Inmates diagnosed with or exhibiting signs of mental illness must have proper assessments and treatment, including medication as necessary.

- **Increase security staff on**

administration detention units. The more volatile conditions in these units require adequate staff, especially for ensuring safety during increased movements.

- **Ensure consequences for assaultive behavior.** DOC must hold inmates accountable for major infractions like assaults on staff or other inmates.

# ON THE LOCAL LEVEL

## Decatur Sanitary District local grows its ranks

CHAPTER 2 OF AFSCME LOCAL 268 has 13 new members, expanding the ranks of the Decatur Sanitary District's local union by more than 50 percent.

New AFSCME member Roger Dudley said that job security and transparency were his number one reasons for joining the union after more than 20 years on the job.

"If you're not union, management can come in and say, well we don't like the way you look at me or something like that and you're gone. You don't have any backing," Dudley said. "Strength in numbers is a big thing. The more people you have the more bargaining power you have."

And this local is a lot more powerful now.

The new members had been made all kinds of promises over the years. But more often than not, those promises were broken as management asked them

to wait just one more year. The workers rarely received raises and the method behind any pay increase they did get was a total mystery.

"Now we will know what kind of raise we're going to get because we're negotiating it," said Dudley, an engineering technician who oversees construction projects at the district.

He said there was consensus among the non-union employees to join. "We talked amongst ourselves and everybody said, let's do this."

The new employees have been added into the existing union contract and most will receive two percent raises for the remaining two years of the contract. They will have a representative on the labor-management committee and the bargaining team.

Chapter Chair Sam Mattox, a mechanic who maintains the sewer lines and pumps, said he's proud of his new brothers and sisters for standing up.

"They needed backing, representation and a voice," Mattox

said. "Now there's no false hope. Now they know what the future holds."

"For us to pick up 13 people was enormous, it was phenomenal," said Brian Tish, a shop steward who works as a maintenance mechanic in the plant and helped with the organizing effort. "It doesn't happen every day. Now we're all union brothers and sisters."

The newly expanded AFSCME chapter is 100 percent union. Negotiations for a new contract start in 2018.

## Williamson County employees make strides

THE CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS, court security officers, visitation supervisors, sheriff's clerks

and sergeants at Williamson County signed a five-year contract with five percent annual raises.

Brandon Elam, president of Local 3369, said that the important thing to making advances is standing strong.

"We want our members to be safe and secure and enjoy their work. And get paid accordingly," Elam said. "There's always going to be a fight, and you can't back down."

Elam bargained the contract alongside AFSCME Council 31 Staff Representative Jeremy Noelle. Together they protected the clothing allowance for employees and a previously secured bonus vacation day reward for limited use of sick time. The union also now has final review and approval of the vacation bid calendar to ensure

the schedule is acceptable.

To make pay more fair for everyone in the local, the union set up a pay matrix for court security officers. These part-time positions had previously not enjoyed a pay structure based on longevity, so a new hire would be paid the same as someone with ten years of service.

"Now longevity actually means something for these important positions," Elam said. "We also secured a pay raise for sergeants and supervisors and added aunts and uncles to our bereavement leave policy."

Overall the local feels very positive about what it was able to accomplish in negotiations where they presented a unified front.

"Strength in numbers is a big thing. The more people you have the more bargaining power you have."



AFSCME Local 268, Chapter 2, expanded its ranks by more than 50 percent when 13 of their co-workers joined the union.



Members of AFSCME Local 2342 won better working conditions in recent negotiations.

## Home health workers improve working conditions

THE LONG, TAXING HOURS FOR home care nurses, physical therapists and occupational therapists were the number one

**“There’s always going to be a fight, and you can’t back down.”**

concern of AFSCME Local 2342 members as they bargained a new contract with their employer, Presence Home Health.

“Home health care is not a nine to five job,” local president Harald Anonsen said. “There is little balance between your professional life and your personal life.”

“Our main focus in negotiations was always on working conditions, much more than salaries,” Anonsen said.

These health care professionals meet with patients in their homes because they are unable to leave for medical ser-

vices. Employees’ work is measured with a point system calculated by the number of patients served and the types of service provided each day.

AFSCME members at this local were a full point above the national average of six points per day—meaning their hours were much longer.

“I felt our best accomplishment was that we were able to get our productivity requirement down to the national average,” Anonsen said. They also secured two percent annual raises for three years.

This contract is a huge step forward for the relatively new local, which formed in 2013.

“We felt we needed to have a voice,” Anonsen recalls. “There was no respect from the employer. That’s always where it starts, isn’t it?”

Under the new agreement the staff can also take 15 days of vacation at one time instead of the previous limit of ten days. That’s an important accomplishment for the many immigrant employees of the local.

“A lot of us have families in other countries, including Thailand and the Philippines, and it’s not easy to get home when you travel for 24 to 36 hours each way,” said Anonsen, a native of Norway. “Being able to take a

longer trip was something very important to our members.”

The bargaining committee was led by AFSCME Council 31 Staff Representative Kathy Steichen and included Anonsen, Vicki Affinito, Maryanne Vidal and Pam Foster.

“We are pleased with what we were able to do, realizing there is still much more to be done,” said Anonsen. “It took a lot of effort to get the employer to agree to our proposals. I think they feel like they gave up a lot.”

## Improved climate in Jefferson County

AFTER YEARS OF DIFFICULT negotiations, a recent election made a big difference for Jefferson County employees.

“We had new people on the county side of the table after the election, and that made for a lot better negotiations this time around,” said James Wray, president of AFSCME Local 3664.

The 46 employees who work in the highway department, court house, circuit clerk, treasurer, states attorney, county jail, assessments office, animal control and highway department signed a four-year contract that included three percent annual raises and only

a minor increase in health care costs in the third year of the agreement.

The bargaining team also won a clothing allowance and reduced the courthouse staff’s hours so their shift ends at 4:30 p.m. instead of 5:00 p.m.

“I’ve been here 40 years,” said Wray. “It’s always been tough to negotiate with the county board chairmen over the years, but this year it went very well.”

“We had a good negotiating committee. We’ve had more than a year of meetings in the past, but this time it was done in just two months.”

The Local 3664 bargaining committee was led by AFSCME Council 31 Staff Representative Jeremy Noelle and included Wray, as well as Hillary Keip, Kathy Holmes, Tammy Walker, Karen Backstrom, Dorothy Porter, and Dave Goldman.

## McLean County Highway workers drive forward

SMOOTH NEGOTIATIONS PAVED the way for a three-year contract for the 18 highway department employees of AFSCME Local 537.

President Adam McKinney said he is very proud of the

whole contract, which includes 2.5 percent annual raises and was resolved in just two meetings with the county.

“We were able to get summer hours in the contract, where we start an hour early and end an hour early from Memorial Day to Labor Day,” McKinney said. “The whole local loves it.”

“We were also able to get our seasonal members (we call them snowbirds) eight hours of paid time off, which is huge.”

Members of the local agreed to be paid their unused sick time in the second month after retiring so the county could minimize any increased costs. As a result, the county was able to ensure that everyone’s pension will be higher in the long run.

“Instead of the county taking away a benefit, we were able to compromise and come up with a win-win situation,” said AFSCME Council 31 Staff Representative Renee Nestler.

Brian West, Jim Alexander, and Kyle Batterton joined Nestler and McKinney on the bargaining committee.

McKinney has been an AFSCME member for more than 20 years and believes that “being part of a union gives us a voice.”



# RPS Employees Stand Up For FAIRNESS

On a frigid March day, Rockford school bus drivers, paraprofessionals and nutrition services workers went out on strike.

Hundreds of members of AFSCME Locals 692, 1275 and 3210 walked the picket line at public schools across the city for three days. They sent a clear message to the Rockford School Board that they are not going to back down, and that their work is vitally important to the functioning of the district's schools.

After months of sluggish bargaining, the board imposed its extreme terms in January. Already paid near-poverty wages, now employees' take-home pay will drop dramatically after 100% increases in health care costs. Many will no longer be able to afford health insurance for their families.

The board made this decision citing financial constraints—yet they are sitting on a \$105 million cash surplus.

"We're on strike because the board isn't showing any good faith in negotiating," said Donna Claeyssen, a nutrition services worker and member of AFSCME Local 3210. "They just implemented changes. We work hard. Management should come back to the table and negotiate to make it fair."

"I work two or three jobs, year-round, just to make ends meet," said paraprofessional Devonna Foat, a member of AFSCME Local 692.

Devonna is a single parent of four children. Her son is a sophomore in college and, like many of her co-workers, her three youngest children are students in the public schools. She says the district's actions don't reflect its purported values.

"They say they want to be the best school district, but how do you do that when you're hurting the students' families?"

## Walking the picket line

AFSCME members from all 48 schools participated in the first-ever strike of the three local unions.

The night before the strike, school employees rallied with teachers, students, other unions and allies outside the school board meeting.

"If this school board cared about kids, they would respect and bargain with the people who transport, feed and educate them!" AFSCME Council 31 Executive Director Roberta Lynch told the crowd, as freezing winds whipped around them.

"You are not walking out—you're standing up for fair wages and affordable health care!"

The outpouring of support throughout the strike warmed the hearts of the picketers. Elected officials like Rep. Litesa Wallace and newly elected Mayor Tom McNamara and aldermen called on the board to do the right thing and return to the bargaining table.

"I am beyond proud of what the striking Rockford school employees accomplished together," Lynch said in a letter to the members. "This three-day strike demonstrated your courage, strength and unity. The energy on the picket lines was remarkable to behold."

"You took a stand, not just for yourselves and your families, but for all Rockford workers. And because of that you had the support of the community behind you."

"We had more support in the community than we ever thought," Foat said.

But the biggest source of support was felt from inside their ranks.

"We had a lot of solidarity among all three locals. We were on the line, standing together, keeping each other uplifted and positive," Foat said.

"It was a great experience," said bus driver and AFSCME Local 1275 President Ashley Smith, "because we were all walking the line together. Our union is so much stronger than we were a year ago."

## Back at the table

Rockford Superintendent Ehren Jarrett pledged in a letter to parents during the strike that the board would "bargain with each labor union in good faith."

But when AFSCME members met with the district to negotiate after the strike, the superintendent went back on his word. The district refused to offer any new proposals and rejected the union's new offers to pay more toward health care costs.

"Time and again, including during the strike, school board members and Superintendent Jarrett claimed that they were willing to compromise," AFSCME Council 31 Staff Representative Ed Sadlowski said. "But at the first chance to back up their words with actions, they refused to do their job and negotiate."

## Looking to the future

"We're still fighting," Foat said. "Now we just have to keep focused, stay strong and stay together, fighting as a union."

"We're all a little afraid of the unknown," Smith said. "They are threatening us with outsourcing. People are concerned for their families. But we know that we have to keep fighting for that very reason."

