AFSCME fights Cook County budget cuts

See page 16
Pension crisis must be tackled head on

The drumbeat to reduce pension benefits of current public employees grows louder each day. Everyone from the frontrunner in the Chicago mayoral primary, Mayor Rahm Emanuel, to state House Speaker Mike Madigan and Minority Leader Tom Cross are on the negotiating table about the supposed excessive retirement benefits earned by local government, university and state employees.

Politicians are performing the war dance, but the drums are being beaten by the corporate chieftains who are trying to enrage the taxpayers who supposedly foot the bill for pensions.

Actually, it’s only a portion of the cost that taxpayers underwrite directly.

A properly funded public pension plan will derive 80 percent of its revenue from the contributions made by members and the return on fund investments. Of course, the key is “properly funded.” Only one major Illinois public pension fund, the Illinois Municipal Retirement Fund, fills that bill. That’s because under state law, the IMRF bills each local government yearly for what’s needed to fund the mess will attack all the plans.

They are dead serious about cutting our pension benefits, but fortunately they have serious obstacles to overcome.

First there is the Illinois Constitution and its Article XIII, Section 5 which states: “Membership in any (public) pension or retirement systems...shall be an enforceable contractual relationship, the benefits of which shall not be diminished or impaired.”

That language may be critical to constitutional scholars, and it might be clear to you and me, but it’s not obvious to a lot of elected officials who are sworn to uphold the Illinois Constitution. It’s unclear to them, not because they’re stupid or they can’t read. Their minds are blurred by the staggering amounts of money it will take to pay for underfunded liability.

For instance, the city of Chicago will collect a total of $700 million this year in property taxes but it would have to put that much just into the pension funds annually for the next 50 years, to get to an adequate funding level.

The state’s underfunding of pension plans is equal to about three years of its total discretionary general revenue funds, which are used to pay for all state programs—public safety, human services, education and the gamut of other functions it undertakes.

Little wonder that some politicians, most notably former U.S. House Speaker Nest Gingrich, have proposed allowing states to declare bankruptcy, thereby allowing them to get out from under pension obligations.

Our union has been fighting this idea and will continue to press the Congress to reject it, but it is very much an option worth considering.

You can believe that the same politicians who created this problem will irresponsibly negotiate funding the pensions when the price tag was lower will try even harder to avoid their responsibility now that the cost has mushroomed.

While it’s clear that the pension crisis is not born of extra-generous benefits, it’s not so obvious what the solution might be.

Obviously, arrogating the constitution or allowing bankruptcy judges to declare our retirement plans insolvent are not acceptable to us. Those are battles that we will wage vigorously in the courts and in the Congress to preserve the retirement benefits to which we are entitled. But we need to work just as vigorously in the legislature and in the court of public opinion to make the case that our pensions are fair, and should not be wantonly slashed.

Let us be of a clear mind. The purpose of our creation. But if we want to preserve our pension benefits, we will need to participate aggressively in the struggle for a solution.

We can’t afford to stand on the sidelines and hope that the folks who are responsible for the mess will solve the problem of our retirement security.
The 96th General Assembly went out with a bang in the wee hours of the morning on Tuesday, Jan. 12, when legislators voted for a significant hike in the state income tax.

AFSCME AND A DETERMINED GROUP OF ALIENS FOUGHT LONG AND HARD FOR THE DESPERATELY NEEDED NEW REVENUE THAT WILL FINALLY BEGIN TO FILL THE Cavernous STATE BUDGET HOLE AND BEGIN TO GET ILLINOIS BACK ON TRACK. IT WAS AN ACCOMPLISHMENT THAT GRABBED HEADLINES ACROSS THE STATE AND REVERBERATED AROUND THE COUNTRY.

SB2505 passed the House 60-57 and the Senate 30-27 and was quickly signed by the governor. It raises the personal income tax rate to 5 percent and the corporate rate to 7 percent through 2015, when those rates go down to 3.75 percent and 5.25 percent, respectively. In 2025 they go down to 3.25 percent and 4.8 percent.

Coupled with a bill that closes some corporate tax loopholes and preserves expiring estate-tax provisions, this tax reform package is expected to yield more than $6.5 billion per year.

“This revenue is desperately needed to close the state’s budget deficit, fund public services and jobs, and pay down the huge backlog of bills,” Council 31 Director Henry Bayer said. “Its passage is an extraordinary achievement for AFSCME members — all of us — whose jobs and the services we provide depend on adequate state funding.”

Creating jobs, not killing them

The new revenue will begin the process of paying down Illinois’ $15 billion deficit, including the $8 billion backlog of unpaid bills and the $4 billion payment owed this year to state pension systems. New revenue over the next four years will help the state fund the continuing appropriation for the pension systems. It will shore up a declining credit rating, lowering borrowing costs and making it easier to secure future funding.

Passage of SB2505 immediately stabilized the state’s fiscal position and improved investor confidence in Illinois.

The Center for Tax and Budget Accountability estimates it will create 92,450 public- and private-sector jobs in the state.

Bill had some drawbacks

SR2505 wasn’t all good news for AFSCME members.

• The bill includes so-called “spending caps,” which set limits on the amount of money that can be appropriat ed by the legislature in each of the next four years. If these caps are exceeded, the tax increase is nullified.
• It doesn’t do anything to modernize the tax structure by extending sales taxes to cover services, which are the fastest-growing part of the state’s economy.
• It does not include corresponding increases in the Local Government Distributive Fund, so cities and counties do not get any new money.
• It does not make Illinois’ tax system more progressive, thus leaving low-income taxpayers to bear a heavier burden of the increase.
• It does not close several important corporate loopholes that would lighten the burden on individuals and families.
• And it is only temporary, leaving the state to face new deficits in a few years.

State constitution needs change for progressive tax

After all the years that AFSCME has fought for a tax increase, why did it finally pass now?

“Because the state was in such dire straits,” Council 31 director of political and community affairs John Cameron said. “And because Pat Quinn beat Bill Brady for governor. And because voting for a tax increase didn’t hurt the political fortunes of those who had voted for a tax increase last year.”

He noted that of the 48 incumbents who voted for a tax increase, 46 won re-election in November, and of the 71 incumbents who voted against those bills, five lost.

Cameron argued that permanent reform will take amending the Illinois constitution, which now requires a flat rate for income taxes.

“We need a progressive tax,” he said. “Many surrounding states and the federal government tax on ability to pay, with those in the upper income brackets paying a higher rate. Illinois now has one of the most regressive tax structures in the nation. We are going to have to work for a constitutional amendment to change that.”

Tax hike shores up Illinois finances
The attacks on unions and on public employees in particular have not bypassed Illinois, and AFSCME members here will have to rise to the challenge if they want to defend their jobs, their standard of living and the services they provide.

“In virtually every city, every county in this state, we are under the gun,” Council 31 Director Henry Bayer said. “The corporate elite and their henchmen in the state legislature want to do the same thing to us that has been done to private-sector workers. They are bent on destroying what’s left of the middle class. If they can cut the wages and pensions of public employees, it’s another nail in that coffin. And the only thing that stands between public-service workers and these assaults is their union.”

The attacks have intensified during the economic crisis that is in its third year.

Speaking at the annual Council 31 Legislative Conference, Bayer noted that recent efforts by Republicans in Congress to get federal legislation to open the door for states to declare bankruptcy were part of these attacks.

“They want it not to stiff the bondholders, but to stiff us,” he said.

If a state were in bankruptcy, it would be able to legally reneg on pension commitments and void union contracts.

“‘Reform’ is a code word for ‘screw you,’” she said, drawing knowing laughter from the 600 conference delegates and guests. “This is a dangerous time. But we are a determined bunch of people.”

Lynch laid out several steps local unions should take to prepare for the onslaught.

• Build unity in your local union.
• Build solidarity with other unions in your community, especially those who represent others who work for your employer.
• Deliver the best possible services and make sure the public knows what we do.

Council 31 leaders hear call to action

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• Deliver the best possible services and make sure the public knows what we do.
Expected assault on pensions aimed at all public employees

They are coming after the pensions of current employees,” warned Council 31 Deputy Director Roberta Lynch at the recent AFSCME Legislative Conference. “They call it ‘reform.’ In this case that’s just a code word for ‘screw you.’”

A well-coordinated campaign, checked on by the Chicago Tribune, is aimed at challenging the Illinois constitution’s prohibition on cutting the pension benefits of current employees. That’s a battle AFSCME members cannot win without dispelling the misinformation that is being spread through nearly every form of mass media.

Below are some facts that you can use to set the record straight.

Public employees earn less than private-sector employees

When you take education level and experience into account, this is true even when health and retirement benefits are included. “Public workers get lower pay than private-company employees even when benefits are included,” Bloomberg News reported. “Total compensation is 6.8 percent lower for state employees and 7.4 percent less for local workers (and) the pay gap is widening.”

Many public employees do not receive Social Security

Teachers, university employees and those who work for Cook County and the city of Chicago don’t qualify for Social Security. For 78 percent of the participants in state-funded retirement systems, their pension is the sole source of retirement income.

Most employees do not have “Cadillac” pension plans

The caregiver for the disabled, the child protection worker, the state park employee and many others – the typical retired state employee on the standard formula who does receive Social Security — earn an average pension of about $24,000 a year. The typical state retiree leaves the workforce with 24 years of service, which under the current formula yields a pension benefit of 40 percent of their final average salary. Most employees of university or local governments have similarly modest pension benefits.

Public employees do contribute significantly to their own pensions

City of Chicago and Cook County employees pay 8.5 percent of their salary into their pension systems. State employees on the alternative formula contribute 8.5 percent of their pay into SERS.

And state employees on the standard formula in effect contribute 7 percent of their pay. This amount would go directly into the pension fund. But that 3 percent hasn’t gone into the pension fund. Politicians have habitually failed, over several decades, to pay the state’s share of pension costs.

Public sector not out of line in retirement costs

The state’s normal cost for pensions (not counting the past amounts they have failed to pay) is about 8 percent of payroll across the three large pension systems (teachers, state employees, university employees). The state additionally pays about 3 percent of payroll into Social Security, because only one in five pension-fund participants are eligible. In all, the state’s normal cost for retirement benefits is about 11 percent of current payroll. In the private sector, every employer must pay 6.2 percent of payroll into FICA. And on average, they contribute an additional 4 percent to 5 percent of payroll to an employee 401(k) or pension plan. That’s a total cost in the private sector of 10.2 to 11.2 percent of payroll.

Corporate elite does just fine on their own pensions

The Commercial Club of Chicago is leading the charge to slash pension benefits for public servants, using what the editorial board of the Chicago Sun-Times called “exaggeration and gross simplification of Illinois pension systems” to mislead and misinform the public.

The Big Business elites who run this lobbying group don’t seem to see the irony in their own golden pension parachutes. Take the chairman of the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club for example: Abbott Laboratories CEO Miles D. White, whose total compensation from the company in 2010 topped $26 million. When he retires, he will draw on not one but two defined-benefit pensions currently worth a combined $20 million. All this for a guy whose company’s stock fell 11 percent last year and who on Jan. 26 announced the layoff of 1,900 employees – 1,000 in the Chicago area.
On the Move

Union braces for more attacks on collective bargaining

As On the Move went to press, HB5424, a bill that would bar any collective bargaining agreement for state employees from extending beyond the gubernatorial term in which it was negotiated, was on the governor’s desk. The bill would also bar state employees from receiving any pay increases or benefits that are not contained in the first six months of the new term of office.

If the governor signs it, the master agreement to be negotiated next year—to replace the contract that expires June 30, 2012—will only run for three years, until June 30, 2015. It will also bar future agreements like the one that saved the state millions of dollars and prevented layoffs and facility closures through June 2012.

HB5424 was passed despite the lack of any evidence that the current system of bargaining does any harm to taxpayers. On the contrary, “The collective bargaining process for employees under the constitutional officers has worked to the benefit of taxpayers by enabling state government to function efficiently and to develop a stable, skilled and experienced workforce,” Council 31 legislative director Joanna Webb-Gauvin said. “Since the constitutional officers has the constitutional authority to function effectively. Having that threat is a deterrent and removing it will have before it could do even more harm.

Thousands of current members could lose union rights

Thanks to a down-to-the-wire grassroots lobbying Palooza, AFSCME was able to put the brakes on a lame-duck-session move to strip the right to union representation from thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of current and potential union members.

SB894 was not called for a vote in the Senate after passing the House 64-49. It took an aggressive campaign of lobbying, calls and e-mails from members, and the solid support of other unions, to prevent this bill from going forward.

Proponents and the news media misleadingly presented the measure as narrowly focused on a limited number of former merits-compensa- tion state employees now represented by AFSCME. But the bill was written so broadly and so poorly that if passed, it could have threatened to take AFSCME representation away from up to half of all current AFSCME members who work for the state.

For example, any employ- ee with administrative responsi- bility for how a policy is carried out would be deemed a policy-making employee and would be denied the right to union representa- tion. This could include, for example, frontline employees in the depart- ments of Human Services, Children and Family Services, Employment Securi- ty and Corrections, or virtual- ly any other agency.

“Superisors” who mostly do frontline jobs, “adminis- trative” employees and those with “policy-making” duties would also lose the right to be represented.

“This is, plain and simple, an anti-labor bill that we will strongly oppose,” Webb-Gauvin said. “We suspect that this or a similar proposal could resurface. Our members should be prepared to fight it again.”

Bankruptcy for states—a bankrupt idea

W

ile there is currently no legal basis for states to declare bankruptcy, some congressional Republicans are toying with the very bad idea of new federal legislation that would allow states to get out from under their liabili- ties.

Illinois Comptroller Judy Baar Topinka called the concept “little more than a covert attempt to renegotiate our covenant with public employees. It’s a terrible idea. We should pay our obligations, not plot to escape them.”

Under the bankruptcy provisions being proposed, states could negate collective bargaining agreements and revise pension plans.

“Public employees should not have to bear the burden of political mismanagement,” Topinka said. “We know the state promised employees a pension when they were hired and if I have anything to say about it, they’re going to get it.”

Former Republican Speaker of the U.S. House Newt Gingrich, one of the chief proponents of the bank- ruptcy idea, was quoted as say- ing “The very fact of the bill existing... allows governors to sit down with unions and say ‘Look you, negotiate with us or I’m taking the state into bankruptcy.’”

In addition to leaving decisions about state taxes and spending in the hands of federal judges rather than officials elected by the people, bankruptcy would have ruinous effects on states’ ability to secure credit for building roads, bridges or schools. It would drive up interest rates on bonds, sucking more money out of state treasuries to pay borrowing costs.

If there were ever a state that might consider an outlaw- lanah idea like bankruptcy, it might be California, which faces a $26 billion dollar deficit, the largest in the nation. However, California’s State Treasurer, Bill Lockyer, has rejected the idea because he knows that the state can close its budget gap by taking a balanced approach to spending and revenues and because he understands the consequences of declaring bankruptcy.

Lockyer said: “The truth is that no state wants to declare bankruptcy, no state needs to declare bankruptcy and no state would. It would severely injure a state’s econo- my, their local businesses, working families, investors and taxpayers to declare bankruptcy... States have the tools to fix their budget deficits and reduce pension liabilities without wreaking havoc on their economies and inflicting some needless pain on investors, taxpayers and businesses in their states.”

AFSCME has been lead- ing the effort in Congress to take the air out of this trial balloon — and gaining some unusual allies.

State bankruptcy is such a bad idea that even a member of the GOP leadership, House Majority Whip Eric Cantor, has announced oppo- sition to the idea.
AFSCME members will have their hands full as the 97th General Assembly gets down to business for the 2011 spring session.

The current climate dictates that stopping the things we don’t want will occupy most of our time and resources,” Council 31 legislative director Joanna Webb-Gauvin said. “We will mostly be playing defense this year.”

Because so many of the bills already thrown into the hopper contain direct attacks on AFSCME members, their benefits and their rights to bargain collectively, the union must be ready to mobilize a lobbying effort on very short notice, Council 31 Deputy Director Roberta Lynch told those attending the conference.

“Every one of our members is at risk,” she said. “We have to be able to turn on a dime.”

Key issues AFSCME will support

- Authorizing the state to restructure its debt, allowing for the payment of overdue bills at a lower cost to taxpayers and bringing relief to hard-pressed entities such as disability agencies, school districts and local governments;
- Expanding the taxing authority of local governments;
- Revenue-raising measures to address the state’s budget shortfall, including expanded gaming opportunities, a sales tax on services and closing corporate tax loopholes;
- Sufficient funding to avert service cutbacks and layoffs in community disability agencies and to provide for an increase in pay for frontline workers;
- Adequate funding for state universities where severe budget cutbacks could lead to layoffs and furlough days and make contract negotiations more difficult;
- Establishing strict accountability standards for any proposal to privatize services currently provided by state government;
- Improving health-care quality by establishing requirements for adequate nurse staffing in Illinois hospitals and providing for nurse input into staffing plans;
- Giving school district and university employees the right to qualify for unemployment benefits when they are laid off over the summer months; and
- A constitutional amendment that would make it possible to build real progressivity into the Illinois tax structure and to ensure that the wealthy pay their fair share of taxes.

Key issues AFSCME will oppose

- Any effort to reduce the pension benefits of current employees;
- Legislation to shift Illinois public employee retirement plans from defined-benefit plans to defined-contribution plans;
- Efforts to reduce or eliminate retiree health-care benefits;
- Legislative efforts to restrict local taxing authority;
- Efforts to put limits on state spending, either through the artificial spending caps in the tax-increase legislation or by putting a constitutional amendment on the ballot that would limit state spending (called TABOR, or taxpayer bill of rights);
- Any effort to circumvent or undermine the collective bargaining process and the rights provided by the Illinois Public Labor Relations Act and the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Act (see page 6);
- Any renewed effort to strip bargaining rights from thousands of state employees (see page 6);
- Any effort to diminish benefits for injured workers under Illinois’ worker’s compensation system;
- Agency restructuring that would disrupt and diminish public services without producing cost savings, like the proposed merger of the Department of Juvenile Justice and the Department of Children and Family Services;
- Any attempts to close or downsize state facilities, such as prisons, mental health or developmental centers;
- Privatizing any service currently provided by public employees;
- Efforts to fund one type of service for the mentally ill or developmentally disabled by cutting another type.
AFSCME members in Illinois face attacks from all directions as the new General Assembly session gears up (see pages 4, 5, 6).

But what’s happening here at home is part of a much broader, coordinated campaign. The corporate elite is taking advantage of the weak jobs picture to build on their run-away success over the past three decades in concentrating the nation’s wealth and power in the hands of the rich and powerful.

“The richest Americans are claiming so much of the country’s total income growth that there is not enough left over for most families to see anything but sluggish growth,” says the Economic Policy Institute in its “State of Working America” report.

Those at the top still aren’t satisfied. They are now looking to enhance their wealth and power by pushing the standard of living for working families even lower.

**Undoing the middle class**

That’s where the attacks on public employees come in.

With unions making up the only credible source of real opposition, and private-sector unions down to 7 percent of the workforce—public employees, more than 35 percent of who are in unions, have become the No. 1 target.

Weaken the public-employee unions and the race to the bottom accelerates for everybody.

“The assault on public employees is really an attack on the middle class,” Council 31 Director Henry Bayer said.

The Chicago Tribune provides a good example of what Bayer is talking about.

“Privatizing janitorial, technology, food and other internal state services would save many millions today, and reduce pension burdens tomorrow,” according to the paper’s editorial board.

The Tribune makes no pretense of claiming, like most privatization advocates do, that privatizers manage better. No, they just want to save the state money by lowering wages and taking away benefits, and think privatization will be the best way to achieve that.

**‘If they want to strike, they should be fired’**

Collective bargaining rights are being threatened by newly elected anti-worker politicians.

John Kasich, the new Republican governor of Ohio, “appears to be planning the most comprehensive assault against unions,” the New York Times reported. “He is proposing to take away the right of 1,400 state-financed child care and home care workers to unionize. He also wants to bar strikes by teachers, much the same states bar strikes by the police and firefighters.

“If they want to strike, they should be fired,” Mr. Kasich said in a speech. “They’ve got good jobs, they’ve got high pay, they get good benefits, a great retirement. What are they striking for?”

But Kasich isn’t alone.

Gov. Scott Walker of Wisconsin is “threatening to take away the right of government workers to form unions and bargain for contracts,” reports Zachary Roth in The Lookout blog.

And GOP lawmakers in Maine, Indiana, Missouri and seven other states are pushing so-called “right-to-work” laws that would make it harder for unions to raise money by barring them from requiring workers they represent to pay dues or fees.
Middle class loses as assault on government escalates

Privateers manage better. No, they just want to save the state money by lowering wages and taking away benefits, and think privatization will be the best way to achieve that. Director Henry Bayer said.

Many millions today, and reduce pension burdens tomorrow, “according to the paper’s editor.

Collective bargaining rights are being threatened by newly comprehensive assault against unions, “the New York Times reported. “He is proposing to unions down to 7 percent of the workforce — public employees, more than 35 percent of police and firefighters.

What are they good jobs, they’ve got high pay, they get good benefits, a great retirement. What are they taking them from requiring workers they represent to pay dues or fees.

And of course in Illinois, Democratic House Speaker Michael Madigan pushed through a pension bill cutting benefits for newly hired public employees.

The Times article cites bad signals from Democratic governors in the two biggest states:

New York’s Andrew M. Cuomo “is expected to call for a one-year salary freeze for state workers, a move that would save $200 million to $400 million and challenge labor’s traditional clout in Albany.”

In California, new Gov. Jerry Brown said, “We will also have to look at our system of pensions and how to ensure that they are transparent and actuarially sound and fair — fair to the workers and fair to the taxpayers.”

And Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin is “threatening to take away the right of government employees — to call them ‘faceless bureaucrats’ and portray them as hooligans who are making off with your money and crippling federal and state budgets. The story fits better with the Republican’s Big Lie that our problems are due to a government that’s too big.”

Reich debunks the lies that go with this story, like that “bargaining rights for public employees have caused state deficits to explode.” He points out that states like Texas, where public employees don’t have bargaining rights, are in just as much trouble as states where they do. Texas is currently facing a $25 billion state budget deficit in the next two years.

There are some defenders of public employees.

“Public servants are convenient scapegoats,” said Robert Reich, U.S. Secretary of Labor in the Clinton administration. He argues that the attacks “deflect attention from corporate executive pay that continues to rise… even as corporations refuse to hire more workers.”

He wrote, “It’s far more convenient to go after people who are doing the public’s work — sanitation workers, police officers, fire fighters, teachers, social workers, federal employees — to call them ‘faceless bureaucrats’ and portray them as hooligans who are making off with your money and crippling federal and state budgets. The story fits better with the Republican’s Big Lie that our problems are due to a government that’s too big.”

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The New York Times reports on “A group composed of Republican state lawmakers and corporate executives, the American Legislative Exchange Council,” which is “quietly spreading” proposals in nearly every state, with suggested legislative language, that would weaken public employee unions and pave the way for lowering wages and taking away benefits. The group is funded by some of the nation’s wealthiest individuals and biggest corporations.

One of its spokesmen said the goal was “to reduce labor’s swollen power. ‘Government budgets have grown and grown because of the cost of employees’ pensions and salaries.’” That kind of rhetoric is becoming common. A Wall Street Journal columnist pronounced: “The biggest state budget gaps will never be closed until politicians use the tools they already have to challenge the overwhelming power of public employee unions.”

Big money fuels assault

These politicians aren’t operating in a vacuum.

Right-wing think tanks and much of the mass media are doing the spade work and creating the negative climate:

“Sucking the system dry,” shouted a headline about public employee pensions in the Courier-News, a Northern Illinois newspaper chain.

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Attacks aren’t coming just from Republicans

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In California, new Gov. Jerry Brown said, “We will also have to look at our system of pensions and how to ensure that they are transparent and actuarially sound and fair — fair to the workers and fair to the taxpayers.”

It’s only average workers — both in the public and the private sectors — who are being called upon to sacrifice,” Reich wrote.

“This is what the current Republican attack on public-sector workers is really all about: … They’d rather set average working people against one another — comparing one group’s modest incomes and benefits with another group’s modest incomes and benefits — than have Americans see that the top 1 percent is now raking in a bigger share of national income than at any time since 1928, and paying at a lower tax rate.”

Nobel-Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman is another defender of public services.

“Right now, triumphant conservatives in Washington are declaring that they can cut taxes and still balance the budget by slashing spending,” he said in his New York Times column. “Yet they haven’t been able to do that even in Texas, which is willing both to impose great pain (by its stinginess on health care) and to shortchange the future (by neglecting education).”

Unequal sacrifice
The Affordable Care Act continues to phase in provisions that help working families, with a Jan. 1 effective date for some important new reforms.

Despite efforts by Republicans in Congress to repeal the new law, millions of U.S. citizens are already getting help from the changes it has wrought.

Though congressional Republicans claim that decreasing the national debt is their No. 1 priority, the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office reports that repealing the act would add $230 billion to the federal deficit over the next 10 years.

Some observers think Republicans may have made a tactical error by pushing repeal. “Maybe the new House leadership believes it needs to stage this fight to keep the Tea Party types from going rogue,” Washington Post columnist Eugene Robinson wrote.

Provisions already in force

Already in effect are provisions that:
- Forbid insurance companies from denying coverage to children with pre-existing conditions (And beginning in 2014, adults with pre-existing conditions must also be covered);
- Make it illegal for insurance companies to drop coverage for people just because they get sick;
- Require insurers to allow children to remain on their parents’ health plans until age 26; and
- Prevent insurance companies from setting lifetime limits on coverage, and phase out annual caps on coverage.

Reining in drug and insurance companies

When fully implemented, the Care Act will provide coverage to more than 32 million people, save an estimated 40,000 lives a year and provide dozens of new benefits and consumer protections.

As of Jan. 1, the law:
- Requires health plans to spend at least 80 percent of premiums on direct care and quality assurance — 85 percent for plans in the large-group market;
- Makes it illegal for insurance companies to drop coverage for people just because they get sick;
- Requires insurers to allow children to remain on their parents’ health plans until age 26; and
- Prevent insurance companies from setting lifetime limits on coverage, and phase out annual caps on coverage.

Keeping labor’s history alive

The Illinois Labor History Society stands guard over the history of working people’s struggles to forge a better life for themselves, their families and their communities.

The battles won and lost must be remembered, says Council 31 Regional Director Larry Sprack, who is also president of the ILHS.

“We are trying to move into the future with a new website,” Sprack said. “We hope to reach more young people who will learn labor history and in turn become activists.”

The website is at www.illinoislaborhistory.org.

The society has served as steward for the Haymarket Martyrs Memorial in Forest Home Cemetery since 1971, when it became the owner of the monument and plot of land.

The significance of this symbol of labor solidarity was explained by Robin Bachin, a scholar at the Newberry Library in Chicago. “Historians consider Haymarket one of the seminal events in the history of American labor. On May 1, 1886, close to 300,000 strikers nation-wide and 40,000 in Chicago took part in demonstrations for the eight-hour day. This movement was part of an international struggle for workers’ rights, and the heart of the movement was in Chicago.”

Lethal violence broke out at a demonstration in Haymarket Square, and a group of anarchists were unfairly blamed for it. “The trial and subsequent execution of four of the men — Albert Parsons, August Spies, Adolf Fischer and George Engel — has served as enduring symbol of labor’s struggles for justice,” Bachin wrote. “…The monument itself has become an icon of the labor movement that has taken on international historical significance beyond its role in commemorating the events of 1886.”

Now the monument is in disrepair, and the Labor History Society is raising funds to restore it. “Restoration of the monument is a symbol of gesture in building international labor solidarity,” Sprack said. “That solidarity is the only way we will stop the race to the bottom for working people.”

Sprack urges union members to “Ask your local to send us a check and help us keep history alive.”

Details are on the website, www.illinoislaborhistory.org.
Expanding union’s ranks makes locals stronger

So the local began a campaign to make AFSCME more visible on campus: They recruited and trained new stewards; they started a regular newsletter; they had union tables in the cafeteria; they built a membership action teams; they’d be able to communicate quickly and efficiently with every member; they lob-bied the state legislature for more revenue.

Then they started signing up the represented workers. Suddenly they were winning grievances. And their contract bargaining resulted in a great new agreement.

“People started to see a higher AFSCME profile,” staff representative Carmen Ortolf said. “They were seeing so much action, it got them interested.”

Then the local used the Freedom of Information Act to get a list of unrepresented employees.

“We invited them to have lunch with us, eat pizza and learn about the union,” Ortolf said. “They were ready to be part of the union.”

So far the effort has brought more than 10 titles and 70 members under the AFSCME contract, and several more are in the works.

Aurora Public Library

Worked about layoffs in the city and the continuing effects of the recession, some of the computer assistants at the Aurora library came to Local 2283’s president and told a regular newsletter they were interested in being represented. The local already represents most of the front-line staff.

Then local union officers went out to talk to the other computer assistants, and every one signed a union authorization card.

“They have specialized skills and they were being under-compensated,” staff representative Flo Estes said. “They went to $12.50 an hour, from $7.”

DuPage County

COUNSELORS IN THE DuPage County Probation Office were looking for protection against layoffs. Some of the group of five had been probation officers at one time, and thus had been union members.

“They knew the benefits of being in the union,” Estes said.

Once they had signed up for the union, management tried to get them into a separate local, but the existing Local 3128 voted overwhelmingly to include them.

Cook County Health & Hospitals System

LOCAL 1111 REPRESENTS SUPPORTSTAFF IN COOK COUNTY’S PUBLIC HOSPITALS AND CLINICS. WHEN MEMBERS LOOKED AROUND THEIR WORKPLACES, “WE SAW THERE WERE PEOPLE DOING THE SAME KIND OF WORK WE DO AND THEY WERE NOT PART OF THE UNION,” said Carmin Willis-Goodloe, the local’s president.

“We knew they should be.”

To discuss the prospects of becoming part of the union, stewards reached out to workers in a number of unrepresented titles, including business managers, employee assistance counselors and transportation supervisors.

They had some solid points to make. AFSCME members who work for the county have their own pay plan, while unrepresented workers, who in the past were getting raises to match what the union had negotiated, hadn’t received a raise in several years. And with a tight county budget, county revenues headed downward with a tax cut and major changes in the Health System, job security was becoming an issue.

“We had a list of who was in these titles,” Willis-Goodloe said. “If the stewards didn’t know them, we found someone who did. It’s been a snowball effect. People wanted to know that when they came to work the next day, they’d have a job.”

Cook County

LOCAL 1276 REPRESENTS PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL WORKERS IN THE COOK COUNTY PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT AND THE HEALTH AND HOSPITALS SYSTEM.

With a list provided by the county, the local began contacting unrepresented workers.

They were able to add several titles, from systems analysts to business managers to janitors.

“We went through the list and tried to decide the best way to get them interested,” said Kim Doss-Patterson, the local union president. “The systems analysts had a sub-contractor managing them and didn’t like it. I knew somebody in the department and he helped me meet with other people in his group. I told them about the union. I reminded them they would have automatic pay plan and that with the threat of layoffs they’d be protected with bumping rights and seniority. It was black and white stuff in our contract. Then we sent letters out with union information, but three just returned the cards.”

A Glossary of Organizing Terms

• Collective bargaining – The process a group of workers use to negotiate the terms and conditions of employment with their employer.

• Bargaining unit – Employees with a community of interest who are represented by the same union and work under the same collective bargaining agreement.

• Authorization card – Sometimes called a union card, it is the official document that indicates the signer wants to be represented by the union.

• Majority representation – In this case a group of public employees can obtain union representation when a majority of them sign authorization cards.

• Fair share – Public employees cannot have a contract that requires union membership as a condition of employment. But they can negotiate a contract provision that requires non-members to pay a “fair share” or fee to compensate the union for negotiating, administering and enforcing the contract.

On the Move

February-March 2011

Noah Shubert

L O C A L 9 9 9 , W H I C H R E P R E S E N T S every level gets squeezed.

LOCAL 1276 R E PR E S E N T S SU P -ERNs to business managers to janitors.

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City of Chicago

COUNCIL 31 sent letters to staff assis-tants in city of Chicago depart-ments to see if they were interested in becoming part of AFSCME. They were.

“They saw how union members were being treated,” Council 31 organizer Abigail Davis said. “They saw that union members didn’t have to take all the furlough days that non-union employ-ees were taking. They wanted job security and a voice at work.”

There are 240 employees in this title, spread across the city. The six AFSCME locals that represent city employees used their member action team leaders to circulate authorization cards, and a substantial majority signed up for the union.

A number of other titles have also come on board in the last year, including social workers, communicable disease investigators and senior public management coordinators.

“In workplaces all around the state, the benefits of an AFSCME contract are profoundly evident to people who work beside our members,” organizing director Tracey Abman said. “It gives them a voice and a seat at the table when decisions are being made that affect their lives. And people without representation are on their own. They’re getting whacked.”
**SHORT REPORTS**

**Union pushback slows downsizing at McFarland**

The state has closed a 12-bed forensic unit for adolescent boys at McFarland Mental Health Center. DHS has also said it wants to close 26 beds in the center’s civil unit and open 26 additional forensic beds (used for mentally ill convicts or those too disabled to stand trial) in a newly remodeled building on the grounds. But the union is objecting to that move, and the state has backed off for now.

“Under the best-case scenario they will keep the civil beds open and open the forensic unit, too,” Council 31 staff representative Erik Hostetter said. He led a team from Local 2767 that sat down with the administration to negotiate the changes.

“Our members had a lot of hard questions that the department was unable to answer,” Hostetter said. “The demand for services on the civil side is very high. McFarland is the safest net for people with severe mental illness in Central Illinois. We don’t believe the state should be backing away from that responsibility.”

DHS claimed that private hospitals would be taking on a larger role in treating those individuals. But the department has not identified excess capacity in the area’s private hospitals that could take that role.

A right-to-work state weakens unions by forbidding collective bargaining agreements that require employees to pay dues or fees to cover the cost of bargaining. The editorial goes on: “Private contractors make money by reducing staffing levels to the bare minimum, paying less and keeping training costs low. The result is staff turnover that is four times greater than at public prisons.

Noted that, at the private prison, violence was “three times more prevalent than at the eight facilities still under state management.”

The paper cited several studies that shed doubt on the premise that private prisons are cheaper to run. Whatever savings there might be “don’t necessarily get to the taxpayer. Get in line behind shareholders and CEO compensation. Whatever savings society enjoys by simply warehousing felons under brutal conditions, it pays later when they complete their sentences and emerge on the streets.”

The editorial’s conclusion: “Idaho has made a mistake. But the error was not selecting CCA. It was privatizing its prison management in the first place. Some things you don’t privatize.”

**Economic: U.S. government redistributes wealth to the wealthy**

The economic rules of the game are written by the government, and they strongly favor the super-rich, according to well-known economic writers. Despite its anti-government rhetoric, “the right uses government all the time to advance its interest by setting rules that redistribute income upward,” writes Dean Baker, co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research.

The rich are getting richer, as shown by the chart on pages 8-9.

**Direct-care workers save a life at Pinnacle**

A client at Pinnacle Opportunities was so fortunate enough to have Sue Been and Delectos Kennedy around.

The two members of Local 3518 were working at a food pantry, giving her CPR, reassurance and comfort until paramedics arrived.

“If you have the training and need to use it, it just comes naturally,” Been said.

“You don’t stop to think about it,” Kennedy said. “You just do it.”

The union raised objections despite the fact that no jobs will be lost. “AFSCME members at McFarland and other state psychiatric facilities are mental health professionals who care about the quality of services patients receive,” Hostetter said.

“People with severe mental illness in Central Illinois could be helped by such programs that end up committing crimes and get sent to forensic beds,” Council 31 staff representative Erik Hostetter said. He led a team from Local 2767 that sat down with the administration to negotiate the changes.

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ON THE LOCAL LEVEL

No layoffs, wages up in Macon County

Wages for Macon County Highway Department workers go up from 2.5 percent to 2 percent in each year of a five-year agreement.

The county agreed not to lay off any union members in the 17-worker unit, and to keep the workforce at a minimum of 16. There was no change in the health insurance plan.

“We started out with what we thought was a fair proposal and they came back with a proposal that we felt was showing it to us,” said Warner Hirstein, who served on the Local 612 bargaining committee. “They were offering no raise for the first three years. It was a disgrace, and we made it known what we thought about it.”

Eventually negotiations resumed and the county “moved a long way,” Hirstein said. “We finally came to an agreement we felt we could live with. Of course we wished we could have done better, everybody does. But we know things are tough all over in this economy.”

The union committee was led by staff representative Chris Hooser, with Hirstein, Jeff Robb, Zach Page and Gary Williams.

Wage gains at Clearbrook

Wages at Clearbrook, a non-profit agency that provides services to the developmentally disabled, went up 3 percent along with a $2,901 bonus in the first year of a three-year contract. The starting rate for the lowest pay grade increased by 50 cents. Local 2871 agreed to give up three personal days, which they were rarely able to utilize, but kept all 12 sick days, which management had tried to take away.

“At first they didn’t want to give us anything,” said Tina Anderson, the local union president. “Then they offered to give us a raise, if we’d give back all 12 of our sick days. We told them ‘no.’ We weren’t going to pay for our own raises.”

Management went so far as to send union members a letter, saying they would terminate the contract. The bargaining team held a union meeting, to make sure the members were behind them. They circulated a petition that demonstrated strong support.

“We stood by what we wanted,” Anderson said. “The members all came together and said they weren’t going up any sick days and they were willing to fight.”

The union’s negotiating team was led by staff representative Carla Williams, with Anderson, John Demmert, Antoine Dunlap, Amber Rhodes and Fidelia Marroquin.

Jobs secure in Woodford County

A three-year contract raises wages an average of 2 percent for Woodford County employees. The contract establishes a pay plan that includes 25-cent annual increases and 50-cent step increases. Those who won’t get step increases will get bonuses.

The contract guarantees all 20 bargaining unit positions will be maintained at least through Nov. 30.

“Because of the economic atmosphere, it was frustrating at times,” Local 2908 President Kim Holmes said. “Prices are still going up. So not all members were 100 percent satisfied, but the majority were very satisfied.”

Chris Hooser led the bargaining team with Holmes, Dan Steffen, Glenn Fischer and Brach Huschen.

AFSCME focuses on aldermanic races in Chicago

With a new mayor coming in and a large number of open seats on the City Council, aldermanic races in Chicago will be crucial in determining the direction of city government.

With that in mind, city of Chicago AFSCME locals began early with a focus on key aldermanic races. The union remained neutral in the mayoral primary. Picture here are local union activists working the AFSCME phone banks for the Feb. 22 primary voting.

Sheridan counselors gain on wages

UNIQUE IN WASHINGTO N, Sheridan Correctional Center who had to strike in 2007 to win union recognition and now work for WestCare Foundation. Local 472 members realized that pay differentials were arbitrary, with some long-time employees getting less than new hires doing the same jobs.

“Our main focus was getting salaries in line,” negotiating committee member Roberta Kline said. “We are trying to keep it as fair as possible for everybody.”

That meant some people got much bigger wage increases than others to level out the inequities.

Kline said committee members were frustrated because the company did not take them seriously when they tried to discuss work procedures.

“For the most part the negotiations were pretty smooth, though,” she said.

Terms for health insurance will remain unchanged in the first year of the contract. Raises and insurance in the second and third years will be negotiated in separate bargaining.

Staff representative Joe Plufer led the negotiating committee, with Local 472 President Rob Fanti, Kline, Lisa Carrico, Erin Doehler and William Paris.

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Retirees face new attacks on their benefits

Chapter 31 activists will have plenty of work to do as the 97th General Assembly gets rolling for this year’s spring session. That was the clear message some 70 retiree sub-chapter leaders heard in Springfield on Jan. 29 at the AFSCME Legislative Conference.

For example, state Sen. Jeff Schoenb erg had announced in January that he is sponsoring legislation that would require state and university retirees to pay premiums for health insurance coverage on a sliding scale, based on their income. “Sen. Schoen berg should understand that retirees deserve affordable health insurance and any changes to retiree health benefits must be negotiated with AFSCME, not pushed through the General Assembly,” said Mary Laure n, a vice president of Alton Sub-Chap ter 39. “This is a very important time for all public sector retirees to come together and fight for the benefits we earned.”

She recalled that Chapter 31 helped fight off attacks on retiree health insurance in last year’s legislative session. “We have to be ready to do it again,” Laurent said. She noted that the legislative agenda adopted at the conference contained a provision pledging to protect public-sector retirees.”

But efforts are already underway to undermine those benefits,” she warned.

Bankruptcy talk is bankrupt

While most retirees have the reasonable belief that their pension is protected in the Illinois Constitution, legislation being discussed on the federal level could allow states to get around that by claiming bankruptcy.

Bankruptcy would allow states to restructure their obligations in court, probably even pensions for current workers and current retirees, but there is no legal precedent, and the outcome is not clear.

“Pensions are under attack from politicians and big-business interests across the country, seeking to blame economic difficulties facing states on public-sector retirees,” said Gloria Smith-Armstrong, a member of Chicago Sub-Chapter 60. “Now they want to come after our pensions.”

But the bankruptcy movement is widely disdained by state of ficials, including Illi nois’ new comptroller, who spoke at the AFSCME conference.

“We need more leaders like Judy B eom Topinka to take a stand against it,” Smith-Armstrong said. “Bankruptcy cannot be an option. Not only would it hurt retirees who upheld their end of the bargain, but it would also destabilize the bond markets creating financial upheaval across the country.”

Can’t let up in fight for Social Security

The attacks on retirement security aren’t limited to efforts at the state level. Social Security is still a favorite target of the corporate elite.

At the conference, I attended a workshop called “Saving Social Security and Medicare,” Pontiac Sub-Chap ter 76 President Ed Corrigan said. “I was surprised to learn that Social Security had a $2.5 million surplus in last year’s new health-care reform law would add 12 years to the life of the Medicare Trust Fund. But I was frustrated that these efforts are underway to essentially cut Social Security benefits by increasing the retirement age and changing the formula for cost-of-living adjustments.

“We hope that AFSCME members retired from the state, a local government, a school district, or a public university this conference reminded us that we had to work together to defend the retirement security that we all worked for.”

Chapter leader runs for SERS trustee

Chapter 31 Vice President Shirley Byrd is running for a five-year term as a trustee of the State Employees Retirement System.

SERS has two annuitant trustee positions, but only one is up for election. The outgoing trustee, Joyce King, a chapter activist who has filled this seat for five years, has decided to step down.

AFSCME Retirees is endorsing Byrd. She retired in 1991, after working at Man teno State Hospital for 21 years and the Tinley Park Mental Health Center for seven years. During her employment she was a steward for AFSCME Local 1631 and sat on several local-union committees.

Immediately after retirement, Byrd sat on the Chapter 37 and 57 and since 1995 has been on the Chapter 31 executive board. She is now on her second term as executive vice president after serving as a trustee and as the northern region vice president. She was also elected for two terms as trustee of Sun River Terrace Village from 1995-2001, and one term as the village’s mayor, from 2001-2005.

She has also been involved in other community activities, including serving on the Kankakee Federation of Labor Community Service Board. The SERS Board of Trustees is the governing body, responsible for selecting the executive director, funds council, actuaries and an internal auditor. Trustees also certify the contributions, establish rules and formulate policy for the proper operation of the system.

Byrd is im portant for AFSCME retirees to participate in this election,” Council 31 trustee coordinator Maria Britton said.

Medicare ‘therapy’ policy challenged

THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE SUFFERING from irreversible medical conditions have lost benefits relating to physical, speech, occupational and other similar therapies in recent years, and several health-care advocacy groups have filed a class-action lawsuit against the federal government, challenging what they believe is Medicare’s unfair therapy policy.

The policy implements a 1997 law that puts caps on certain kinds of therapies. Under it, patients must be making “improvements in functioning in order to qualify for physical, speech and occupational therapy and skilled nursing care.” In instances where patients are not making such improvements, Medicare no longer covers the costs of their therapy.

Medicare beneficiaries suffering from such afflictions as multiple sclerosis or Alzheimer’s disease have lost benefits and many more remain vulnerable under this policy.

Critics of the policy assert that patients can be deprived of services crucial to maintain ing if not improving the current state of their health. Almost 78 percent of the 46 million or so Medicare beneficiaries have at least one chronic condition, such as multiple sclerosis or Alzheimer’s, the suit says.

New year brings Social Security changes

Retirees will have fewer options for how they receive benefits as a result of the 1X Relief, Unemployment Insurance Reauthorization, and Job Creation Act of 2010. Retirees who apply for Social Security benefits on or after May 1, 2011, will no longer have the option of receiving a paper check in the mail. Seniors can have their entitlement payments directly deposited into a bank or credited to their union account or loaded onto a prepaid debit card. This will reduce costs for Social Security by more than $120 million a year. Beneficia ries who currently receive paper checks will need to switch to direct deposit or the prepaid debit card by March 1, 2013.

Retirees will not be able to get an interest-free loan from the trust fund this year. In December 2010, the Social Security Administration announced that individuals will no longer be able to begin payments at age 62, pay back all the benefits received at age 70 without interest, and then reclaim at the higher delayed claiming rate.

Under the new rules, beneficia ries may withdraw an application for retirement benefits only within 12 months of their first Social Security payment and are limited to one withdrawal per lifetime.

Finally, while beneficia ries will still be allowed to temporarily suspend their benefits and restart them later, they will not be able to retroactively suspend benefits and pay back money already received in exchange for higher payments going forward. Retirees will be allowed to temporarily suspend benefits only for months in which they did not receive payments or future benefits beginning the month after the request is made.

Medicare benefits: significant changes in 2011

STARTING JAN. 1 CO-PAYMENTS and deductibles will no longer be charged for preventive care services. This is just one of the improvements retirees will see in their Medicare benefits plan due to the provisions set forth in the new health care reform legis lation, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010. See page 10 for more details.
Public servants shine in blizzard

Despite the ongoing trend to bash public employees, the early February blizzard gave the public and some politicians a chance to appreciate the dedication and hard work of public-service workers across Illinois.

“Weather events such as The Big Blizzard serve as a good reminder of where your tax dollars are going,” wrote columnist Kurt Erickson of the Lee County Newspapers. “You can actually see results when a snowplow is clearing the road ahead of you.”

He quoted Council 31 Director Henry Bauer: “It’s become far too popular to take potshots at public employees. Too many politicians and pundits think they can score points by attacking the jobs, wages and modest pensions of public servants. But this storm showed that behind every road cleared and every tragedy averted, there are thousands of dedicated men and women who go above and beyond for all of us.”

Gee. Pat Quinn also had good things to say about how public employees responded. A press release from his office said the governor thanked the first responders and Illinois National Guard along with those who cleared 16,500 miles of highway.

“I thank the public servants and service members who worked together to ensure public safety and preserve critical state services during this dangerous storm,” Quinn said. “Nearly the entire state was affected by this major winter storm, but by working together we were able to help more than 4,000 people in distress, ensure that essential state services were continued without interruption.”

Nearly 50 conservation police officers used all-weather vehicles, including more than 50 snowmobiles and ATVs, to rescue or provide assistance to more than 550 stranded motorists during the height of the storm.

Other storm-related state efforts included providing updated information about shelters and warming centers, road conditions, interstate access restrictions, and winter safety tips; coordinating with critical facilities, such as hospitals and nursing homes, to ensure they had power, water, medical supplies and staffing to remain operational; and tracking power outages throughout the state.

Digging out, pitching in

TROUNDS of AFSCME mem-
bers pitched in to keep services flowing during the critical moments of the storm. Below are just a few of the many examples.

• Logan County was one of the hardest-hit areas in central Illi-
nois. Local 501 members who were there before the storm hit were asked to stay and keep Lincoln Correctional Center secure and provide food and other basic needs for the inmates. The facility faced multiple consecutive shifts until the highways were opened and relief officers could get in.

• Members of Local 692 at Ray Graham Association volunteered to stay for 24 hours and longer so the disabled residents wouldn’t be left alone.

• In Chicago, police civilian employees are “first responders” and were all called to be at work during the storm. Members who staff the 311 city hot line were there throughout the emergency, staffing switchboards, updating callers with information and sleeping in the 311 center. Support staff for the towing operation worked long hours, helping to keep track of the hundreds of stuck cars being relocated.

• Family Support Services workers in Local 1699 were in the streets, locating homeless peo-
ple, the elderly and others unable to cope with the blizzard on their own and making sure they could get to a safe, warm place.

Getting people moving again

• John King walked a mile through 28 inches of snow to get to a highway, where other employees from Illinois Veterans Home at Quincy could pick him up and get him to work. “We had to care for the vets,” said King, who is president of Local 1787.

• Debra Reese is a Residential Defender. She commuted to work from 3 p.m. Monday, and had not left as of Thursday. She worked a single shift Monday and stayed overnight. Asked how she worked double shifts, sleeping at the facility between her doubles. She wanted to make sure that the inmates were in receipt of care. She was taking care of.

• Beth Asquino and Mary Kay Welsh are State’s Attorneys for Macoupin County. “I’reminded of the night we were working and didn’t leave post until 6:30 this morning,” said Anna Stone, a communications supervi-
sor and member of the local. “Mary Kay arrived at post around 1:30 on Tuesday for her shift that started at 2:30am and didn’t leave here until 10:30am Wednesday night.”

• Mike Tay-
lor, presi-
dent of Local 813, city of Decalb, worked 20- plus hours on water main breaks and plowing, as did as many of the members. “We were back and forth between different kinds of jobs,” he said. “Water mains and uncovering fire hydrants, then back on the snow plow. We just couldn’t get people moving again.”

• Macon County Highway Department workers did 12-hour shifts on 10-mile plowing routes of the county’s rural roads. “We’d get one lane open, then it would blow closed and you’d have to go back around again.” Local 612 mem-
ber Werner Hirscher said. “There are so many things to think about when you are on that plow. You really have to concentrate when you are out there for 12 hours.”

AFSCME members battle

Continued from page 16

“In the case of a child seek-
ing adoption, the potential to be placed in a home that is unfit, unstable and unsound…”

Local 5486 President Jim Dun-
away is an adult probation offi-
cer. “Reducing the number of probation officers’ will risk public safety by hindering effective supervision of offend-
ers convicted of violent offen-
ses. If you want to keep the citi-
zans of Cook County safe, you will need to keep the budget that reduces the number of adult probation officers.”

Local 3315 President Bob

Gallaher is an assistant public defense- age. The layoffs of 63 attorneys, and half our investi-
gators and support staff is noth-
ing more than a shell game that is going to cost the citizens of Cook County far more than it will ever save… The responsibil-
ity for providing effective assis-
tance of counsel to the accused poor rests with the county and ultimately with you, the com-
munities… The county will wind up paying private attor-
neys more money to do our jobs.”

Quaid Cunningham is a juve-
nile probation officer and mem-
ber of Local 3486. “We work with gang-involved youth… We provide community service workers… We facilitate peace circles to offer an alternative to anger and violence. We work with victim advocates. We have a drug court diversion pro-
gram. We offer a second chance at education… and offer job-readiness skills… We offer clinical interventions and violence-prevention workshops. We are mentors…”

“We represent one of the most important investments in preserving safe communities and healthy, safe and school-engaged chil-
dren.”

Patti Simone works in the State’s Attorney’s Drug Treat-
ment Unit and is a member of Local 2960. She said the budget cuts to the Victim/Witness Assistance Unit would affect “critical services needed by peo-
ple who have done nothing wrong other than to have the misfortune of crossing the path of harmful or dishonest peo-
ple.”

And cuts in the Child Sup-
port Unit “will backlog cases and make a situation more dif-
cult for innocent children. Council 31 Associate Director Mike Newman reminded the board of the problems that will be caused by cuts in the health system.

“Under this budget, those who depend on the county for basic health-care services who live on the south side and south suburbs will have much less access to services. It will be harder for them to get the care they need — and as a result when they do seek care, going all the way to Stroger Hospital, they will be much sicker and it will be much more costly to treat them.”

“Of course, we are not say-
ing that no changes should be made in the way county govern-
ment operates,” Newman said. “Four years ago, we argued strenuously for a budget that cut hundreds of high-level man-
agement positions that were not essential to the functioning of county government rather than laying off frontline employees.

“But those cuts at the top were never made and today we again beg our members about biased management ranks. Ironically, many management vacancies have been filled in recent months. Sometimes these posi-
tions were vacant for many months, even years, with no adverse consequences to ser-
dvice delivery. We have other ideas for how the county can reduce draw-
ings and we stand ready to work with all those who share our concern for critical county operations — who care about preserving essential services for citizens and prevent employee layoffs — which harm families and communities.”

On the Move February-March 2011 15
Preckwinkle’s budget would:
• Reduce access to health care for those in need on the South Side and in the South Suburbs — closing down maternity and intensive care services and ending ambulance runs at Provident Hospital, while closing the Emergency Room and all inpatient services at Oak Forest Hospital;
• Drastically cut back on support services for crime victims;
• Reduce legal aid for the indigent — making it more difficult for those wrongly accused to gain legal representation;
• Eliminate the graffiti removal program;
• Reduce support and counseling programs for at-risk youth; and
• Lay off 1,500 employees.

The cutbacks come linked to Preckwinkle’s campaign promise to repeal the second half of a 1-percent sales-tax increase, the first half of which was repealed last year.

During the three public hearings held in the frigid days of mid-February, hundreds of AFSCME members turned out to show support for those among their ranks who testified to the damage to services that would be done by the proposed cuts. Below are selections from the testimony of a few of the many who spoke at the Feb. 9 hearing in Maywood. The other hearings took place after On the Move went to press.

Local 1276 Chief Steward Mike McReynolds is an intake worker in the Medical Examiner’s Office.

“As I made my way along salted walkways to get here I picked up several pennies — pennies, inconsequential and unwanted — beneath notice to the average politician, newspaper publisher, or taxpayer — until it comes time to strut and profile in front of the cameras. Suddenly, a penny becomes 1 percent … and it’s too darned much to pay — too darned much for pay for the workers that actually arrest the suspects, do the investigations, provide the information that frees the innocent and convicts the guilty, provide legal representation for the County and the accused in our courthouses, work in our jail system, provide the quality care that results in healthy births, along with the ongoing health care that not only protects our children’s health, but our neighbors’ children as well … the indispensable workers who brave blizzards and heat waves to provide necessary services — those services that protect us all, rich and poor, that mark us as a civilized society — a penny is too much to pay for these workers?”

Local 1767 President Stephen Ramsey works as an investigator for the Cook County Office of the Public Defender. He said cuts in the court system’s attorneys, investigators, caseworkers and support staff will make “a justice system in which you’re supposed to be innocent until proven guilty … turn into a plea market for private attorneys and leave a person without proper due process.

AFSCME MEMBERS BATTLE COOK COUNTY SERVICE CUTS, LAYOFFS