



December 29, 2008

Jeanette D. Wynn: Union is good for state workers

Jeanette D. Wynn

My View

These have been terrible times for state workers, with two years without raises and the threat of layoffs constantly looming.

But state workers have a powerful friend on their side that millions of workers wish they had.

A union.

In 2009, AFSCME Florida Council 79 will celebrate 30 years as the exclusive representative for state Career Service employees in the Human Services, Operational Services, Administrative/Clerical, and Professional bargaining units.

We also represent U.S. Postal Service workers at Florida A&M and Florida State universities. In this area, we have five local unions (three state and two university) in Leon County, one in Gadsden County, and another in Jackson County.

What has AFSCME done for state and university workers?

Some would blame us, the union, for not doing enough, but the collective-bargaining process for public employees at the state level is broken. Although the Florida Constitution guarantees public employees the right to bargain collectively, state law makes the Legislature the arbiter of disputes between the state and its workers, including those of wages. A better process would be binding arbitration, as is often used at the local level.

Instead of relying on negotiations with the governor, state unions go directly to the Legislature to win benefits and enhance their power in the political process through grass-roots work and political contributions.

Although state workers and other public employees have not received a raise in the past couple of years, our lobbying team won passage in the Legislature of important noneconomic benefits for public employees this year that were signed into law by Gov. Charlie Crist.

Years of work paid off this year when AFSCME succeeded in partnering with state Rep. Marti Coley and state Sen. Charlie Dean, both of whom are Republicans, to make noneconomic improvements for state workers. The Coley/Dean bill requires the state to use objective criteria, including seniority, during a layoff; makes promotions/transfers nonprobationary; and prohibits involuntary transfers of more than 50 miles.

AFSCME also successfully championed a bill by state Sen. Evelyn Lynn and state Rep. Audrey Gibson that is a first step in bringing back safety laws for Florida public employees. Florida law currently contains no provisions regarding the general health and safety of public sector workers at any level. This year, AFSCME will be lobbying for legislation that would require the state, universities and other public employers to meet federal OSHA standards.

In the dark years of former Gov. Jeb Bush's administration, AFSCME was there to save the Career Service system and the "just cause" standard requiring that supervisors have a valid, work-related

reason for discipline. AFSCME also beat Gov. Bush in court (Reinshuttle, et. al., v. DCF, 1st District Court of Appeals) for illegally removing 16,000 workers from Career Service.

When the state abolished the State University System Board of Regents, AFSCME teamed with former U.S. Sen. Bob Graham to pass the amendment creating the Board of Governors and then successfully litigated, at the union's expense, the powers of the BOG.

Why should state or university workers pay union dues?

Florida is a "right to work" state, meaning that union dues are not compulsory even if a worker is covered by a union contract. The workers we represent have legal rights under the State Master Contract and the university contracts. If they are dues-paying members, they are guaranteed representation in any work-related proceeding.

The payment of dues not only protects your job and benefits, but also invests in making your workplace better.

Every year, our lobbying team is protecting the Florida Retirement System, opposing privatization of state institutions, and advocating for raises. In addition to lobbying and work-site representation, union pay for the negotiation of contracts and attorneys to arbitrate terminations. All of this costs a little more than a dollar a day to members.

I know times are tough for state workers, but the union is there for them. We need them to not only join, but also get involved. It is the only way to win long-term improvements in the state Career Service.

Additional Facts

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

- Jeanette D. Wynn of Quincy, retired after 30 years at Florida State Hospital in Chattahoochee, is president of AFSCME Florida Council 79, the union representing 55,000 state Career Service employees and more than 30,000 workers at state universities, cities, counties, school boards and private/nonprofit hospitals. Contact her at <http://www.afscmefl.org>.
-