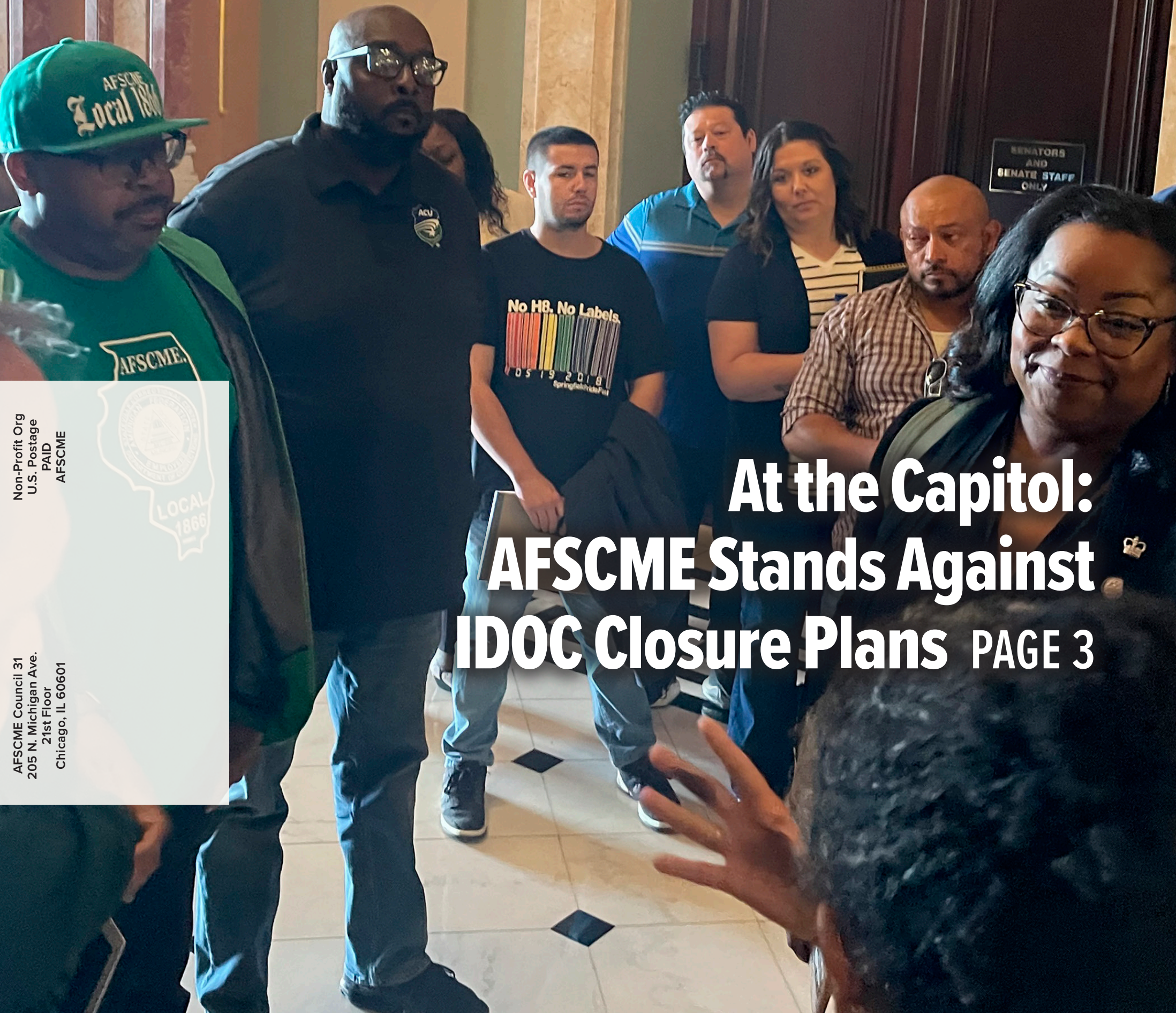


ON THE

# MOVE



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**ON THE MOVE**

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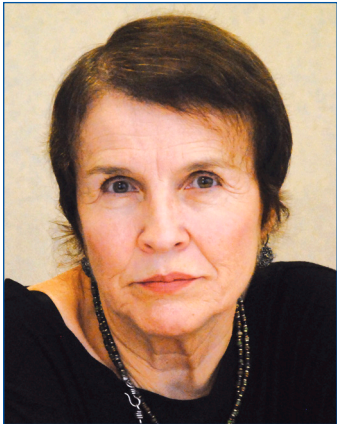
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## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

# Our safety matters

*Turning up the heat on employers for better working conditions*



BY ROBERTA LYNCH

**WE'RE TAKING SAFETY CONCERNS TO THE STREETS**

Recently I learned from a local union president that one of our members had her thumb bitten off by a resident in her care at a state developmental center.

That same resident had previously attacked three other staff members—two of whom required surgery to recover from the wounds inflicted.

Throughout this string of assaults, management refused to take any meaningful steps to protect the employees working on that unit—despite the best efforts of the local union.

At the state's psychiatric correctional center, management ignored the local union's objections to leaving one staff person alone on a unit, even after an employee working on that unit was so badly beaten that she required surgery and has not been able to return to work for months.

Just in the past month, inmates at two correctional centers started all-out brawls that included attacks on a number of staff.

And as the smuggling of drugs into state prisons steadily increases (see page 11), the related dangers of employee exposure to hazardous substances and offender violence increases as well.

Week after week the reports come in—especially from state correctional facilities and developmental centers—of assaults on staff that result in serious injuries.

The common factor among them is all too often the utter lack of concern from management about the dangers that employees confront daily on the job. In too many instances, management flat out refuses to heed the union's recommendations to reduce the risk of serious harm.

The attitude coming from those at the top almost seems to be: 'Well, you signed up for this job and you just have to put up with the dangers.'

But, of course, nobody actually signs up to be beaten up. And there can be little doubt that the current crisis in hiring in both IDHS and IDOC is directly related to the lack of

a strong, affirmative employee safety program in those agencies. New employees come on board and quit in a matter of months, sometimes weeks, after they see how dangerous the work is—and how little is done to mitigate the risks of their jobs.

Tragedy can strike anywhere at any time.

DOC maintenance craftsman Chris James fell to his death after management assigned him a tree trimming task without providing proper safety equipment.

Employees in the state Department of Children and Family Services are painfully aware of the two caseworkers, Pamela Knight and Deidre Silas, who were murdered as they tried to rescue children at risk.

Police dispatchers are forced to work such intense schedules—doing such intense jobs—that they are often stressed to the limit. Nursing home workers can suffer serious back injuries because of a lack of appropriate lifting equipment. Employees in the Chicago Public Library have been threatened by political extremists and people suffering from mental illnesses.

Recently Evanston Public Works employees saw their job injury rate double as management tried to force them to do the same work in the same period of time with significantly fewer staff.

Safety should be the right of every employee every day of their working lives. Yes, accidents happen. We all know that. But it is the responsibility of employers to do everything possible to prevent accidents. And that's not just a matter of hoping for the best. It's a matter of analyzing the risks inherent in the work and then developing strategies to reduce them.

Over the years our union has made safety a priority in labor-management meetings

and at the bargaining table—developing our own solutions and pressing for employers to adopt them. Most of our contracts include safety language that requires the employer to provide a safe workplace. And even where we don't have contract language, OSHA laws place that responsibility on employers.

Employees at the Rockford Public Library just spent months in tough negotiations because their employer was refusing to address the safety concerns they raised. The union held firm and just ratified a new contract that establishes a joint labor-management health and safety committee that gives workers a critical voice in the creation and implementation of new health and safety policies.

And we're not just fighting at the bargaining table. We're taking safety concerns to the streets as well. Evanston Public Works employees held a vocal picket outside of a City Council meeting to emphasize their concerns about unsafe working conditions (see page 7). And within a few weeks of their picket, steps were taken to address those concerns.

But here's what troubles me: Why should we have to make safety a union bargaining proposal? Why should we have to take to the streets to create meaningful change? Why is it that management so rarely takes the initiative to address our safety concerns? Why is it that an employee losing their thumb does not elicit an immediate plan of action by management to prevent that kind of brutal assault from recurring?

Put more bluntly, why don't employers seem to care about the rights of employees not to be battered, beaten, scarred, disabled or killed at work?

I don't know the answer to that. But I do know this: It can't go on.

We're determined to stand up together for our right to work in the safest possible conditions. We're determined to press on every front for concrete changes to improve safety in our workplaces. We're determined to insist that our lives matter.

# AFSCME slams Stateville-Logan plans at hearing

**A**t a Springfield hearing on May 10, AFSCME laid bare how detrimental the Illinois Department of Corrections' proposed plans to close Stateville and Logan correctional centers would be for staff, individuals in custody and the economies of the towns that are homes to the prisons.

IDOC has said it is planning to build new facilities to replace both Stateville and Logan, but those plans come with two poison pills: Stateville would be shut down almost immediately and remain closed throughout the three to five years before a new facility is built; Logan would remain open now, but the new facility would likely be built in northern Illinois, effectively eliminating the jobs of the hundreds of employees who currently work at the central Illinois facility.

Council 31 Deputy Director Mike Newman testified before the Commission on Government Forecasting and Accountability (COGFA), a bipartisan commission responsible for providing an advisory recommendation to state agencies on proposed facility closures. Also attending the hearings were members of AFSCME Locals 1866 and 2073, which represent employees at Stateville and Logan, respectively.

AFSCME's testimony and a subsequent report authored by the union exposed serious flaws in the department's plans and urged the commission to reject them.

"While AFSCME supports

rebuilding Stateville and supports building a new facility on or near Logan's current location, our union believes that DOC's proposed path would needlessly and drastically disrupt the lives of the department's employees, the lives of individuals who are currently incarcerated, their families and the economic well-being of several communities," Newman said at the hearing.

## Questions remain on Stateville plans

IDOC has been unable to answer why it is pressing forward on plans to close Stateville. A report from outside consulting firm CGL found that Stateville has "significant space within its perimeter that could be demolished to provide additional options."

The department has suggested that all Stateville employees would have the opportunity to transfer to other facilities. But its numbers are flawed: At Joliet Treatment Center, just 10 miles away, there are only 44 vacant positions. None of the nearby facilities have the capacity to absorb



AFSCME Locals 1866 and 2073 were in Springfield to urge lawmakers to oppose IDOC's plans.

the nearly 500 staff whose jobs are threatened at Stateville.

Of critical concern is the department's inability to grasp the safety risks its plans create for both staff and individuals in custody. Every available indicator shows that our state's prisons are becoming more dangerous.

"Relocating hundreds of offenders from Stateville to correctional facilities throughout the state will only make this problem worse as many of these facilities are already experiencing violent incidents at a time when they are seriously understaffed," Newman said.

Another key concern is the medical needs of Stateville's population. A high volume of care occurs at the facility's

own medical center and its access to outside care in the Chicago area. The department has glossed over whether individuals now receiving medical care at Stateville will be able to receive that same level of care once transferred.

The department's plans for Stateville would also have a disparate impact on IDOC employees who are women and people of color. Sixty-eight percent of Black IDOC employees work in Region 1, where Stateville is located; the region accounts for 41% of the department's female employees.

## Moving Logan disrupts staff, individuals in custody

In suggesting a new location for Logan CC, the department omitted critically important information in its filings to the commission, entirely glossing over the hardships it would create for current staff.

IDOC identifies two prisons close to Logan—Lincoln and Decatur—that could serve as institutions to which current staff could move. But there are currently 454 staff at Logan and, at those two facilities combined, only a total of 54 budgeted vacancies.

If the facility is closed down and eventually moved to another area of the state, many staff at Logan will only have the option of taking positions that would force them to relocate, causing significant disruption to their lives and families.

Moving Logan to the grounds at Stateville would further disrupt the lives of those individuals in custody and their families. Sixty percent of those incarcerated at Logan have a sentencing county outside the greater Chicagoland area. The only other women's prison, Decatur, is a minimum-security, dormitory-style facility which could not safely house Logan's medium- and maximum-security population.

Logan has a robust offering of academic, career training and other programming available. Some 800 women at Logan are diagnosed as seriously mentally ill, and Logan has a well-developed infrastructure of mental health treatment programming with well-trained and experienced staff that have worked with this population for many years. This programming would be nearly impossible to replicate if the facility is moved.

"The department is not just entirely capable of building modern, safe and state-of-the-art facilities without the needless and drastic disruptions that these closures would cause, it is entirely incapable of pursuing its own plan of action without putting lives and livelihoods at risk," Newman said.

COGFA is required to schedule public hearings where corrections employees, their families, and other concerned members of the community can express their views on the DOC plans. AFSCME members in the Logan and Stateville areas should plan on attending when dates and locations have been set.



Employees of Stateville and Logan CCs met with lawmakers at the Capitol before the hearing.

# SIUE building service workers win in long fight

**A**fter more than 600 days at the bargaining table, building service workers of AFSCME Local 2232 at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville in March won a contract that makes significant progress on wages and working conditions.

Local 2232's AFSCME siblings at SIUE, Local 2887, reached an agreement with the university just weeks before.

The two locals had teamed up for months of escalating actions that put pressure on the university to settle. The local repeatedly went to meetings of the SIU Board of Trustees to demand an end to delays at the bargaining table. Those meetings sometimes became tense as some board members' disrespectful and dismissive attitudes angered the workers in attendance.

"Management has always discounted the value of our work," said Local 2232 President Tony Fearon. "They say what we do is simple, that it adds no value. They used that attitude to justify their proposals, which initially amounted to pennies.

When we proposed parental leave, they laughed at us."

In February, the two locals coordinated a Day of Action that brought members out for yet another action at the board of trustees meeting and to protest at a fundraising gala in St. Louis later that night. These dual actions turned out to be turning points. Within weeks, both locals had reached agreements.

The final four-year contract ratified by Local 2232's members achieved significant wage gains for some of the local's longest serving workers and big advancements in on-the-job rights and working conditions.

"We're talking about raises of \$8,000 a year for some of our folks," Fearon said. "These are employees who have been



Building service workers of AFSCME Local 2232 picket on SIUE's campus.

here 15 years or more. Their entire working lives have been at the university and some are moving into retirement. We were able to push their wages up into places we could call reasonable."

The contract includes an \$1,800 stipend for all bargaining-unit members upon ratification, ends a tiered vacation

accrual schedule, creates a communal overtime pool to expand access to overtime and reduce the burden of mandatory overtime, and establishes new, fairer scheduling rights.

Another major win was one the local had been seeking for years: Expanding their standard workweek from 37.5 hours to 40 hours. That change alone

will result in tens of thousands of dollars in additional earnings over an employee's career and will boost their income in retirement.

The Local 2232 bargaining committee included Fearon, Tyler Toussaint, Becca Halford, Mike Malone and was led by Council 31 Staff Representative Ed LaPorte.

## FIGHTING FOR FAIRNESS IS A FAMILY AFFAIR



Patrick Sheridan (left) and his father, James.

Serving as president of their local union: It's a Sheridan family tradition spanning three generations.

In 2018, when Patrick Sheridan became the president of AFSCME Local 963, which represents building and food service workers at Northern Illinois University, he had a great mentor: his father, James, who served as the local's president before retiring in 2017.

The Sheridan family's history of union activism dates back to Patrick's grandfather, who was the president of Ironworkers Local 136 in Chicago in the 1970s. As a child, James helped his dad prepare the local's newsletter and strike materials, and his father in turn shared his deep knowledge of the labor movement with him. When Patrick came to work at NIU in 2012, it was James' turn to pass on his union know-how.

Local 963 has been engaged in a long fight for a new contract that values the sacrifices made by building and food service workers, such as showing up to work in the darkest days of the pandemic.

While some issues have changed over the years, the core mission of AFSCME Local 963 remains the same as it was when James was president: To gain and maintain fairness and respect for NIU's building and food service workers.

When Patrick and other members of Local 963 have gone to meetings of NIU's board of trustees to voice their frustrations, James has been there to speak, too.

"Those of us who have been around for a while have an obligation to share what we know with the younger generation," James said. "These fights go on."

# Shedd Aquarium workers forming union with AFSCME

**W**orkers at another Chicago cultural institution are forming a union: On April 18, employees of the John G. Shedd Aquarium announced they're organizing Shedd Workers United with AFSCME Council 31.

The announcement came in a public letter signed by 60 workers. When certified, Shedd Workers United/AFSCME will represent about 300 employees across the aquarium, including throughout its departments of Animal Care, Learning & Community, Guest Relations, Facilities and more.

"We believe that by joining together in our union, we can truly have a voice to advocate for our own welfare and for the welfare of the animals that bring us together," employees wrote in the letter.

"In recent years, we have voiced concerns to management regarding work-life imbalance, financial struggles, and lack of communication, but received

little tangible response.

Together in our union, we can bring to light and work to resolve these inequities in order to better our own lives and—very importantly—those of the animals we work to protect and uplift."

The Shedd is one of the premiere aquariums in the world. Workers care for nearly 32,000 animals, including penguins, beluga whales, seals, otters and countless fish from around the world. Nearly 2 million people visit the aquarium annually to learn about marine life.

Although Shedd management claimed it would respect the rights of workers to organize, the aquarium actually hired



The union's logo features a beluga, a shark, a plankton, and Neptune's trident.

two union-busting law firms and soon launched an array of anti-union attacks meant to intimidate employees and prevent them from organizing. Torn straight from the well-worn playbook of corporate

union-busting, the tactics include captive-audience and one-on-one meetings where bosses spread negative misinformation about the union, preventing the circulation of pro-union information, tearing


down union flyers, and threatening workers with the loss of pay and flexibility.

In the weeks since the public announcement, workers have taken to social media to share their reasons for forming a union.

"My co-workers shouldn't have to live paycheck to paycheck at one of the world's most renowned aquariums," said Kirby Garcia, an audience analytics and operations coordinator.

The union's logo—hand-drawn by a Shedd employee—features a beluga, a shark, a plankton and Neptune's trident, the staff wielded by the mythical god of the sea, which tops the aquarium's dome.

Visitors to the aquarium are already showing their solidarity with the workers by wearing union stickers on their visits and hundreds more have signed a petition in support of the union.

Council 31 Executive Director Roberta Lynch called on Shedd management to "respect workers' right to organize free from management interference." 

## MEET LOCAL 1234'S FOUR-LEGGED MEMBER

**Maverick** is what you could call a maintenance assistant at the East Moline Wastewater Treatment Plant. He follows workers out into the field. He keeps watch at night.

But there's one difference between Maverick and the rest of the plant operators of AFSCME Local 1234: He's a black labrador retriever mix.

In a tradition spanning nearly 30 years, workers at the plant have kept a dog on the premises to keep watch and help ease the loneliness of the solitary night-shift plant operators.

The tradition goes all the way back to the plant's first dog, Buddy, a shepherd mix. Buddy lived at the plant until the ripe old age of 15. Next came Bear, a black lab mix just like Maverick.

Don Daugherty, one of the plant operators, says vendors never visit the plant without making sure they've got a handful of biscuits for Maverick. Daugherty's own grandmother stops by with bread and treats for him, too.

"The plant is his home," Daugherty said. "He knows our break times, he knows when it's our lunch time, he knows when shift change is, he knows everything about us and our routines."

Maverick follows the members of Local 1234 everywhere. When they're out on a jobsite, he's right behind them. He particularly enjoys following them to the break room where he's sure to get a snack.

Taking care of Maverick is a team effort. Everyone who works at the plant pitches in for the cost of food and veterinarian visits, and certain people make it their responsibility to feed him.



Maverick and plant operator Don Daugherty.

# “Fix Tier 2” week of action sends strong message to lawmakers

**W**ith some 5,000 phone calls made and more than 50,000 email messages sent to legislators between April 15-18, public employees across Illinois succeeded in making sure that our campaign to fix Tier 2 pensions is on the General Assembly’s radar.

Together with the We Are One Illinois coalition of unions, our statewide grassroots lobbying effort brought the issue of Tier 2 pensions out of the shadows and into the light of day, exposing the inadequacy and injustice of Tier 2’s lesser benefits.

If you were hired in the public sector on or after Jan. 1, 2011, you are on a Tier 2 pension. Although you

contribute the same amount towards retirement as those hired in 2010 or earlier, you will receive a lesser benefit when you retire and over the course of your retirement years.

Many challenges remain on the road to addressing this injustice, chief among them the need to raise additional revenue to avoid jeopardizing the stability of the pension

funds (After decades of pension underfunding by employers, the state has finally begun to make the requisite contributions in recent years. Even so, the state’s various pension funds are, on average, only 44.6% funded).

Fixing Tier 2 and ending the unfair divide in pension benefits will only succeed with continued grassroots pressure. Our lobbying efforts were so impactful that opponents of pension fairness are already organizing to defeat any improvements to Tier 2 benefits.

“If we’re to succeed, we have to stand together—both Tier 1 and Tier 2 employees, and active and retired members—to fight for basic fairness in retirement,” said Council 31 Executive Director Roberta Lynch. “This

campaign is only just beginning. Be prepared to step up and make your voice heard as

this effort ramps up, and stay tuned for more ways you can get involved.”



# Macon County conservation workers join AFSCME

**T**he 20 employees of the Macon County Conservation District protect Macon County’s precious natural areas. Now they have a union to protect themselves.

The new AFSCME members at the district officially formed their union in April. They are responsible for 3,500 acres of parks and public natural areas. They’re natural resources managers and technicians, historical site managers, naturalists and volunteer coordinators, among others. They will join AFSCME Local 268, which represents employees in the city of Decatur.

They mostly spend their workdays maintaining hiking trails, restoring prairies to their native glory, managing the vast woodland preserves, planning community events and looking after the various historical sites on their grounds.

Gage Elder is a site superintendent who played a big role in the organizing effort.

Elder said since starting his job 10 years ago, he’s

gotten married and had three children. As a lifelong outdoorsman, he had every intention of spending his career

at the Conservation District, but was forced to rethink his future there based on the treatment he and his coworkers received at the hands of new management. The idea to form a union came when that management made it clear they wouldn’t hesitate to fire employees for any infraction, no matter how small.

“Morale kept going further

and further downhill,” Elder said. “We had people who were starting to leave because of how we were being treated. It’s a real slap in the face to be told anything you do doesn’t matter.”

Now, with a union to protect them, they’re eager to begin bargaining a first contract so they can establish stronger job protections and

equitable pay increases for all employees.

“We’re going to have a voice and a say in how things happen and just make the workplace better for everyone,” Elder said. “Everyone deserves to go to a job they enjoy, to not feel like they’re going to be let go for no reason, and to get paid a fair wage. The union will help us get there.”



Employees of the Macon County Conservation District.

# Evanston Public Works action nets union wins

**A**fter experiencing a sharp uptick in the number of on-the-job injuries and violations of their union contract, workers in the Evanston Public Works Department took to the picket line in an action that caught management's attention.

In addition to the safety concerns, the union said the city wasn't honoring workers' standby pay, seniority rights and the progressive discipline process.

On April 29, they picketed outside a meeting of the Evanston City Council's Administration and Public Works Committee, before heading inside to say their piece directly to the committee.

**“The picket caught their attention.”**

Eileen O'Neil, the president of AFSCME Local 1891 and a safety specialist, told the committee that chronically low staffing levels are contributing to the troubling increase in injuries.

“We think that it has a

direct impact on our injuries, which have doubled under this current director,” O'Neil said. “Our Public Works members are not disposable. They're human beings and they have the right to a healthy and safe work environment. And cutting corners on preventative maintenance and cutting corners on safety is having a direct physical impact on our workers.”

Of Local 1891's 350 members, 120 are in public works. But the department is short more than 30 positions. While staffing dwindled, management was asking workers to do more with less. For example, sanitation workers were expected to complete their trash pick-up routes in eight hours, even though there were fewer people on a truck.

If they were unable to complete their route in the amount



Evanston Public Works employees picket outside a meeting of the City Council on April 29.

of time management allotted, they would be disciplined.

“It's just not possible to do what management was asking in only eight hours,” O'Neil said.

To circumvent their contract's requirement that workers be paid standby pay whenever they are on call, management started adding a line to job descriptions saying that those positions were required to be on call 24/7, 365 days a year.

When the union insisted that this was a change in working conditions and demanded to bargain over it, management ignored them.

Two weeks after the picket, Local 1891 had a labor-management meeting, where union leaders recommended solutions to the problems they were facing. O'Neil said management was newly receptive to their ideas and acknowledged that they could

do better to keep people safe. Within a week of the picket, management began posting the public works positions that were sitting open.

Management also agreed that their new policy to circumvent standby pay would be removed from all job descriptions and would no longer be applied to current employees.

“We've seen real progress,” O'Neil said. “The picket caught their attention.”

## 2 COs injured in Western CC “all-out brawl”

**A**brawl at Western Correctional Center on May 4 resulted in injuries to two staff members after seven individuals in custody refused to exit the yard for at least four hours.

The seven individuals were in the segregation yard outside Western's restrictive housing unit. Josh Eichelberger, president of AFSCME Local 3567, said officers on the scene reported that the individuals were acting like they were going to climb the fence. Some appeared to be attempting to sharpen objects.

After staff had exhausted all attempts to get the offenders off the yard peacefully, the tactical teams were called in.

When they entered the yard through a narrow gate, the individuals in custody rushed them, resulting in what Eichelberger said was an “all-out brawl.” The tactical team members were bottlenecked in the narrow gate, preventing them from quickly gaining full access.

At a subsequent labor-management meeting, Local 3567 pressed for adding extra gates to prevent the bottlenecking that put the tactical team at a disadvantage.

## Lawrence escape attempt enabled by flaw union pressed to fix

**A**t Lawrence Correctional Center, an individual in custody attempted an escape after spotting a gap in the security fencing that the union had previously expressed concerns about to management.

On April 26, the individual was coming out of a housing unit—with all of his belongings packed—when he ran for the fence.

At the top of the security fence was a roughly 4-foot section that was missing razor wire.

“[The union] raised concerns about this two years ago,” said Jeremy Givens, president of AFSCME Local

3600 at Lawrence. “Management's response was that they were out of money and this is as good as it's going to get.”

The individual got to the second security fence and after he didn't comply with repeated orders, two warning shots were fired. A lieutenant responding to an emergency code was able to apprehend him before

he made it over the final barrier.

“He would have never gotten that far if there was

**“[The union] raised concerns about this two years ago..”**

razor wire on that fence,” Givens added.

Givens said it was clear that the individual in custody had also noticed the missing razor wire because he made a dash directly for it. After the failed escape, Lawrence management finally installed the missing wire.

# AFSCME HITS THE CAPITOL

AFSCME members fight hard for their wages and rights at the bargaining table, but sometimes in order to make meaningful progress, there are issues that require legislative action. And so members also must go to Springfield to make their voices heard.

This spring, AFSCME members who work at state universities, private child welfare agencies and community settings caring for people with disabilities all lobbied lawmakers to make the case for increased funding for the work they do. They told their stories, testified before committees, and pressed legislators for commitments.



As *On the Move* goes to press, the General Assembly has not taken final action on any of these bills.

Follow Council 31 on social media for the most up-to-date information on the state budget and other AFSCME legislative priorities.



## DSPs Return to Springfield

Direct support professionals (DSPs) from across the state converged on the Capitol on May 8 to push for higher wages, the latest lobbying action in a decades-long battle to increase funding for their important work.

DSPs held a news conference at the Capitol that got their message out statewide. It was attended by key legislators including Rep. Maurice West, Sen. Ram Villivalam, Rep. Yolonda Morris and Sen. Rachel Ventura.

The lobbying action came after DSPs spent months laying the groundwork by calling their lawmakers, testifying before House and Senate committees and organizing their workplaces to bring as many members into the fight as possible.

Some 70 DSPs had conversations with 22 lawmakers—Democrats and Republicans—from both the House and Senate. They told their stories in personal and powerful terms—so powerful that nine lawmakers subsequently agreed to sign on as co-sponsors of the wage bills.

In Illinois, more than 22,000 individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities live in community residential settings and rely on DSPs to enhance their quality of life.


From daily personal care such as eating, grooming and dressing, to teaching essential skills and attending to complex medical needs, the work of DSPs can be physically taxing and emotionally demanding.

And many DSPs make enormous sacrifices in their personal lives to protect the extremely vulnerable populations they serve. But the

historically low pay has often forced DSPs to choose between the job and individuals they care deeply for and other fields that pay higher wages.

At their press conference Christine Rivera, a DSP at Ray Graham Association and a member of AFSCME Local 3492, told reporters, “I have stayed in my job for 20 years despite the low pay and ever-increasing demands because I care deeply for the individuals. I know the same is true for many of my colleagues.”

Community disability agencies are almost entirely dependent on state funding for their operations. In years past, AFSCME members have advocated for stronger wages in the form of pass-through funding to their agencies—and they’ve been successful. Through their efforts, state funding has increased to \$19.50 per hour for DSP services.

But they’re not stopping now. Gov. Pritzker’s proposed FY 2025 budget did not include any additional funding for these agencies, which would make it very difficult for employees to achieve wage gains at the bargaining table. AFSCME has made it a top priority to persuade legislators that such funding should be included in any final budget adopted by the General Assembly. 



## Child Welfare Workers Visit Capitol for First Time

AFSCME-represented youth care workers took part in their first-ever concerted lobbying action on May 8.

In Illinois, more than 23,000 young people are served annually by the Department of Children and Family Services and child welfare agencies like UCAN and Maryville Academy, which are under contract with DCFS. While the majority of those children receive care in the homes of relatives, in foster homes, or in specialized foster care, approximately 1,200 of Illinois’ most vulnerable young people are served in institution or group-home settings, emergency shelters, or benefit from independent or transitional living programs.

To support those children, DCFS and its child welfare agencies depend on a compassionate, experienced workforce composed of child welfare workers, caseworkers and paraprofessionals, among others. These






employees are responsible for providing behavior interventions, serving as positive role models and ensuring DCFS-funded programs are properly implemented in as close to a family environment as possible.

Unfortunately, in some cases, those goals are being undermined by wages too low and working conditions too poor to recruit and retain qualified employees into the field.

Rhonda Nesbitt, a community support worker at UCAN in Chicago, said that low wages are driving qualified workers away.

“I’ve been a Community Support Worker at UCAN for 20 years and I am committed to this work,” Nesbitt said. “But we have been plagued by short-staffing and an inability to hire and retain qualified staff to do this difficult and demanding work.”

“We need the General Assembly to support this budget’s funding increases for child welfare worker pay so we can provide the best possible care for the at-risk youth we serve,” she concluded. 



## University Employees Lobby to End Pay Gap



After a report from the Illinois Economic Policy Institute and the University of Illinois found a significant wage gap between university employees and state government workers in the same job titles, AFSCME launched a campaign to close that wage gap.

The study identified a 21% pay gap between non-instructional university employees and their counterparts doing the same work in state government, with more than 90% of non-instructional university employees receiving lower compensation for comparable positions.

University employees do it all. They do the administrative legwork that keeps their institutions running. They make sure campus buildings are safe, clean places to learn. They run food services that feed thousands of students every day.


AFSCME members at state universities have been standing up to fight for fairness at the bargaining table, but in order to truly address the pay gap, more state funding for the universities is needed.

That’s why AFSCME is supporting two bills that would ensure that when the state budget is passed, it contains funding specifically to eliminate that pay gap—and that’s why dozens of university employees went to Springfield to lobby for their passage.

On May 1, after a special briefing on the bills and lobbying best practices, nearly 50 AFSCME members from 13 university locals across the state hit the Capitol. They met lawmakers outside the House and Senate chambers to push for the passage of those bills.

They targeted legislators whose districts surround their universities. Those lawmakers were receptive to their concerns, with many agreeing that something needs to be done to ensure university employees are paid equitable wages.

The following day, Gina Darden (AFSCME Local 370) and Amy Bodenstab (AFSCME Local 2887) put an exclamation mark on the group’s lobbying efforts by testifying before the House Higher Education Appropriation Committee on the bills they were lobbying for.

“We are not here to ask for a handout,” Darden, a medical insurance associate at the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, told the committee. “We are here to advocate for fairness and equity. Our members deserve wages that reflect the value of their work, the contributions they make to our institutions, and the importance of their roles.” 

# Choate employees persist

*Union members remain united in face of facility transition*

**M**ore than a year after the Department of Human Services announced its plans to “repurpose” Choate Mental Health and Developmental Center in Anna, DHS is finding it harder than anticipated to identify alternative placements that match the quality of care Choate provides to individuals with developmental disabilities.

Gov. JB Pritzker announced in March 2023 that DHS intended to “repurpose” Choate Center to serve specialized populations, in part by attempting to move more than 130 residents to other care settings.

Choate is a residential care center that is home to more than 300 people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and mental health issues. Some 450 members of AFSCME Local 141 work at Choate in clinical and administrative support roles.

Choate workers and families of its residents have said all

along that there’s nowhere that can serve those individuals better than Choate can—and so far, they are being proven right.

More than a year after the plan was announced, only a small number of Choate’s residents have been transferred to private group homes or other state-operated developmental centers. All the while, members of Local 141 have stood firm and united. They’re focusing on training more stewards, getting more members involved in the transition process and continuing to build strength through solidarity.

“Choate has a story to tell. In that story, we are resilient, and we will rise above what is going on with this transformation,” said Tina Winfield, president of Local 141. “We are willing to do whatever it takes to make sure our individuals are taken care of.”

One ongoing problem at Choate has been the slowness of hiring and the department’s overreliance on Favorite Healthcare Staffing, something Council 31 has fought to eliminate through the grievance process, as well as persuading management to begin offering state jobs to Favorite employees.

But agency staff have been slow to take the state up on its offer. If Choate is going to continue serving the number of individuals it is currently serving, management needs to get serious about recruitment and hiring. The facility hosted a well-attended job fair on May 16, but the department didn’t make any job postings available until after the fair was over.



Members of Local 141 at a recent town hall discuss the transition.

Families of Choate’s residents have passionately defended the facility and its workers from the outset. Rita Burke, whose son has lived at Choate for more than 30 years, is the president of Choate Families United, a family advocacy group. She has stood by the facility’s workers and has been intensely critical of the department’s plans.

“[The individuals] can’t be moved like puzzle pieces,” Burke told *Capitol News Illinois* in 2023. “They’re human

beings. I think we need to put the ‘human’ back into the Department of Human Services.”

There are still many questions about Choate’s future, but one thing is clear: Choate workers refuse to give up on the individuals they serve. 🦅

For more on our union’s fight on Favorite Healthcare Staffing, see page 14.

## POOR PEOPLES’ CAMPAIGN EXHIBIT ON DISPLAY



A new exhibit at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, “Solidarity Now! 1968 Poor People’s Campaign,” explores one of the most important grassroots movements of the civil rights era: the Poor People’s Campaign of 1968. The exhibition investigates the factors that made this movement a success: the ideas, the emotions, the people, and the place—Resurrection City. AFSCME and other labor organizations offered vital support to the Poor Peoples’ Campaign both operationally and financially.



Through a moving combination of photographs, objects, video, and oral histories, it explores the significance and impact of this campaign that drew thousands of people to develop a protest community on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., to call the nation’s attention to the crippling effects of poverty for millions of Americans.

This traveling exhibit was created by the Smithsonian Institution and is on display at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield through August 18.

# Drugs in Prison: A Growing Danger

**A**t every security level, AFSCME members in the Department of Corrections have reported that offender drug use has exploded over the past two years, to the point that smelling smoke or finding drugs remains a daily occurrence for many corrections workers.

This drug use ranges from fentanyl and ketamine to a massive influx of synthetic drugs, including the widespread and pervasive smoking of wasp/roach spray and synthetic marijuana. It has put AFSCME members in DOC directly in harm's way due to an increase in erratic and violent behavior by offenders, as well as through harmful exposure to the drugs being used. In some cases, it has led to deaths and serious health emergencies for individuals in custody.

While drug use has become more widespread across the entire system—from maximum security to minimum security facilities—AFSCME members have been stymied by department leadership in their attempts to combat the problem.

Action from management to keep prisons drug-free is urgently needed. Mail room protocols have failed to keep up with the new methods used to smuggle drugs into prisons. The department's drug-related data reporting is incomplete and opaque. Meanwhile, the problem only grows worse.

The following are first-hand accounts from AFSCME members in DOC who are contending with this dangerous development.



**“***It's getting worse over the last two years. It's gone through the roof. Five years ago, you smell something burning, you'd be grabbing a fire extinguisher. Now you smell something, you know inmates are smoking something.”*

– Pontiac Correctional Center Employee

**“***It is a daily occurrence that this house reeks of smoke. It gets so bad that it reaches into the foyer, so there are days where there is literally no escape from the smell... [staff] wonder what kind of long-term effects they are going to face in the future.”*

– Western Illinois Correctional Center Employee

**“***It's increasing a lot more over the last year. There's not a day that goes by that you don't smell burning paper coming from somewhere. Some days it's overpowering. I've been in corrections for 12 years... This is something brand new. When I first started, you never heard of any type of drug being at that facility. You never had staff members being exposed and going to the hospital.”*

– Danville Correctional Center Employee

**“***The fumes in the cell house make you dizzy. You get a headache instantly. We have been working in this environment at Pinckneyville for the last two years or more.”*

– Pinckneyville Correctional Center Employee

**“***Most of the assaults [on staff] are where the offenders are either high on some kind of drug or drunk on alcohol. You can't reason with a high person. They don't listen. They're passing out. It's even in housing, because it's coming through legal mail.”*

– Lawrence Correctional Center Employee

**“***On April 19, 2024, we had four staff that had to go to Hillsboro [Area] Hospital for exposure. On January 22, 2023, staff responded to a guy falling all over himself in the day room. When staff responded, they had to be sent out to three different hospitals [for drug exposure].”*

– Graham Correctional Center Employee

**“***If the mail was taken care of, we wouldn't have a drug problem at all...the legal mail isn't even coming from lawyers.”*

– Graham Correctional Center Employee

**“***This is not what these officers signed up to do. The state should be able to provide them with a safe place to work, or at least be taking steps in the right direction to fix it as opposed to looking the other way to a major drug problem within IDOC. At some point the administration's luck will run out, and it will be our members that pay the cost due to the state's negligence.”*

– Western Illinois Correctional Center Employee

**“***“We've had a few [cases] where the smoke has been so bad in the hall that some staff have had to go to the hospital or healthcare. When [inmates] are high, sometimes they're combative and it's hard to control them.”*

– Sheridan Correctional Center Employee

# ON THE LOCAL LEVEL

## “Long, hard fight” nets gains for Joliet bus drivers

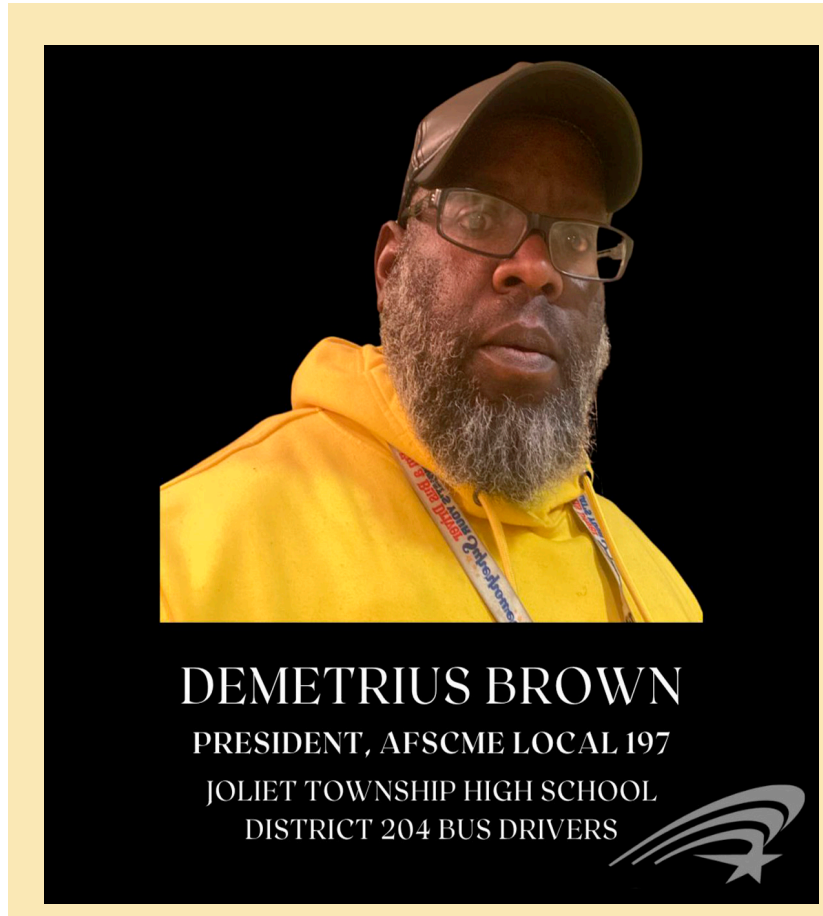
THROUGHOUT THE NINE months that members of AFSCME Local 197 were at the bargaining table, they remained resolute to continue fighting for the strong contract they knew they deserved.

Local 197 represents more than 80 school bus drivers, aides and dispatchers who serve Joliet Township High Schools District 204’s students.

**“We stood strong knowing that the members had our back.”**

Despite management’s insulting proposals early on in the process and meetings where management refused to budge on common-sense changes, the Local 197 bargaining committee never got discouraged.

“We knew what our members wanted and what they would accept in a contract,” said local president and bus driver Demetrius Brown. “We stood strong knowing that



**DEMETRIUS BROWN**  
PRESIDENT, AFSCME LOCAL 197  
JOLIET TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL  
DISTRICT 204 BUS DRIVERS

## We celebrate and remember our AFSCME brother Demetrius Brown, taken from us too soon.

A proud union man, he was so respected by his peers that with less than four years on the job as a Joliet Township High School bus driver, he won the presidency of his local.

That was just two years ago; this year, he led the local in contract negotiations. Despite his health struggles, throughout the many months of hard bargaining, he never spoke of his own suffering but focused on the needs of his members.

Shortly before he died on May 7, Demetrius reported that members were still coming up to thank him for the best contract they could recall.

As members gathered at work to mourn his loss, they spoke of how Demetrius was caring and supportive, and how much he will be missed.

the members had our back.”

That determination was rewarded with a contract that made dramatic progress on a number of fronts. The bargaining team won wage increases of 22.3% over the four-year agreement—an amount that Brown said is the highest that many members have ever seen.

Pay for perfect attendance will increase from \$75 to \$95 per week, helping to address problems that absenteeism can cause.

Provisions were added to

the contract to ensure that summer bus drivers and bus aides will be guaranteed at least four hours of pay per route.

On top of the economic gains, the new contract added Juneteenth and presidential Election Day as paid holidays, as well as reworking rules around extra trips that drivers have the option of taking for events like sports games and field trips.

“We were able to make some great strides on things that we have long thought

were unreasonable,” Brown said.

The bargaining committee was led by Council 31 Staff Representative Stephen Mittons and included Brown, Yolanda Alexander, Leona Geyer and Rebecca Norvil.

*Editor’s Note: This piece was reported before the unexpected death of Demetrius Brown.*

## Berwyn city workers stick together to win fair contract

MEMBERS OF AFSCME LOCAL 1041 who work for the city of Berwyn have won a new contract that looks out for all employees.

Local 1041 members work in the parks department, water and sewer department, the public library and more.

Before bargaining got underway, the union sent surveys to all 80 members asking them to identify the most important issues they wanted to address. Wages were high on the resulting list.

The bargaining committee made solid progress on that front. They secured across-the-board wage increases of 12.5%, with

an additional \$2 added to everyone’s base pay in the third year of the four-year agreement.

They also won more vacation time with a faster accrual schedule, more personal days and expanded health and safety protections for all workers.

Berwyn has a large Latino population. It’s important for city residents to be able to communicate with their local government in the language that’s easiest for them, so in a previous contract, the union had secured an additional \$100 a month for workers who use a second language in their work.

In the years since that agreement was reached, the town’s Latino population has grown, and so too has the need for bilingual workers. In their new contract, ratified overwhelmingly by members, the union was able to boost that stipend to \$250 per month.

“It’s a great contract,” said Local 1041 President Ricardo Macedo, a benefits administrator with the city for 17 years. “It’s a fair contract, and our members were happy with what we were able to win.”

The bargaining committee includes Macedo, Vice President Kristen Newcomb, Treasurer Jeanette Rendon, Secretary Mercedes Saldivar,



Joliet Township High Schools District 204 bus drivers of AFSCME Local 197.



The AFSCME Local 1041 bargaining committee celebrates after reaching an agreement.

included a wage proposal of 0.25% less than the local was demanding.

When the bargaining committee put that potential settlement before the members, it was voted down unanimously. The rejection wasn't just about the 0.25% difference; it was about respect and getting paid what they deserve.

After the vote, the local launched a call-in campaign to the Waterloo mayor and city council. They wanted local government leaders to know their side of the story.

"We wanted them to know we were serious," said Jason Goff, an underground utilities foreman and the president of Local 39. "We wanted to make sure they had all the facts and that our voice was being heard on what our demands were."

proposal down over just 0.25%.

When negotiations resumed, the union bargaining committee was able to secure the wages employees deserved. When they took the final agreement to members, it was ratified overwhelmingly.

The three-year agreement includes across-the-board wage increases of 12.5%, two additional personal days, and new language about operations that will make members' daily lives easier by more clearly defining roles and expectations.

This was the local's first time bargaining with the new mayor and city council. Goff said they struck the right tone in terms of displaying their strength but also showing them that the

Selicia Gunn, Tiffany Jones, Angela Bower, Quinn Stitt, Debra Burke, Emmett Farrister and was led by Council 31 Staff Representative Chris Moore.

## Wilmington city workers look out for undervalued positions

WHEN AFSCME LOCAL 1909 started bargaining a new contract for its 19 members—most of them employees in the public works and water and sewer departments—they wanted to look out for maintenance workers in particular.

**"This contract was pushed through by the entire union."**

The maintenance position had become what Local 1909 President Jack Sadrakula, a sewer plant operator of eight years, called a "dead-end" position. Despite being jacks-of-all-trades who could fix any machinery the city has, their pay would stagnate after five years.

"Some of these job classifications had been made decades earlier and hadn't received any meaningful changes to keep up with the times," Sadrakula said. "We wanted to negotiate with management so they would better mirror the pay scales in water and sewer."

In the final contract ratified by members, Local 1909 was able to shift the pay scales for maintenance titles into the scales of higher-paying public works titles. The result is wage increases of as much as 35% for some in those titles.

There were across-the-board wins too. The local added a 15-year step for some of the long-time administrative workers at city hall, codified more accurate schedules that track closer to what people actually work, and strengthened rights surrounding disciplinary actions against employees.

"A lot of our new members came away seeing what organized labor can do and how it can impact members' benefits and rights," Sadrakula said. "This contract was pushed through by the entire union. I see a lot of happy people out there."

The bargaining committee included Sadrakula, Maureen Surman, Ryan Foster, Dan Seaton, Josh Davis and was led by Council 31 Staff Representative Chris Moore.



Members of AFSCME Local 1909 in the city of Wilmington.


## Local 39 overcomes management's "final offer"

MEMBERS OF AFSCME Local 39, which represents city employees in Waterloo, were hard at work bargaining a new contract when management put its so-called "last, best and final" offer on the table. It

The twin actions of voting the proposal down unanimously and making calls to local leaders sent a strong message to management's negotiators that the members wouldn't simply roll over. Also, by discussing their demands calmly and rationally on the calls, elected officials saw that employees were asking for basic fairness and respect. They weren't being unreasonable in voting the

union is not unreasonable or difficult to work with.

"We maintained a strong, united front, and we're happy with the deal," Goff said. "We think this is a very fair contract."

The Local 39 bargaining committee included Goff, Cole Moore, Keith Washausen, Brian Hoffman, Jeff Davis, Natalie Klopmeier and was led by Council 31 Staff Representative Matthew Whalen. 

# SHORT REPORTS

## Fighting back against Favorite Staffing

**FAVORITE HEALTHCARE** Staffing is a private contractor that the state hires to temporarily work in Department of Human Services and Department of Veterans' Affairs facilities when understaffing becomes a critical problem.

The work that Favorite employees do is work that should be done by AFSCME members, and management's overreliance on the agency is due to a lack of diligence in recruiting and hiring permanent full-time employees. Moreover, too often the Favorite employees are not familiar with the particular challenges of DHS and DVA facilities.

The state's dependence on Favorite began during the emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, with the most serious threats of COVID behind us, the state is continuing to use the pandemic as an excuse to keep Favorite employees in what should be AFSCME jobs.

Through the joint labor-management Recruitment, Hiring and Retention Committee established in the new State of Illinois Master Contract, AFSCME and the state are trying to work together to address the staffing crisis.

But the state has not made enough progress on that front. In an effort to speed up hiring—and reduce reliance on contractual employees—Council 31 signed a memorandum of understanding with DHS that requires the department to offer full-time state jobs to all qualified Favorite employees.

Council 31 is in the midst of challenging the state's use of Favorite Staffing in arbitration proceedings. More information on the arbitrator's decision will be distributed as soon as a final decision is made.

## 911 dispatcher shortage takes serious toll

A NEW STUDY FROM THE National Emergency Number Association and Carbyne (an emergency call software company) found that staffing shortages are taking a serious toll on emergency call center staff.

Of the 1,335 emergency call center workers surveyed, 82% said that their workplace cannot fill open positions. Insufficient staff leads to voluntary or mandatory overtime, shift work, long hours and extra stress, which in turn, leads to more staff calling out of work.

"Staffing issues continue to pose the most significant

challenge to emergency communications centers," the report states. "The high volume of calls from both administrative and emergency lines compounds this issue."

Due to the resulting stress, some 85% of those surveyed said that they experience symptoms of burnout. 44% say they use mental health services.

The workload is only increasing. 33% of call center employees said their workplace experiences a high-call volume event every day, and another 43% said they experience one multiple times a week.

"Wellness/mental health remains a substantial worry in this high-stress environment," the report concludes. "Stress, burnout and anxiety are pervasive at all levels. Despite most employers offering wellness/mental health support, stigma and under-utilization of these resources suggest a need for more proactive approaches to mental health and wellness."

## 2023 records most strikes in 20 years

UNION MOMENTUM REMAINS strong, with 2023 seeing more major strikes than in the last two decades.

In 2023, there were 33 major work stoppages,

according to the report by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Some 458,900 workers were involved in those work stoppages, including AFSCME members.

"It should be no surprise that workers are taking collective action to improve their pay and working conditions—but we should be asking why it is happening now," the Economic Policy Institute said in an analysis of the data. "The U.S. economy has churned out unequal income growth and stagnant wages for the last several decades."

The BLS defined a "major work stoppage" as one involving 1,000 or more workers and lasting at least one shift during the work week. The largest number of major work stoppages before last year had been 39 in the year 2000, according to the agency.

The last few years have seen a wave of worker activism in both the public and private sectors.


In October 2021, some 25,000 workers across the country participated in strikes, including 10,000 at John Deere and 1,400 at Kellogg's. That month, some 18,000 AFSCME members who work for Kaiser Permanente in Southern California voted to strike, a decision that helped them reach an agreement with their employer.

In 2022, union momentum continued. According to Cornell University's Labor Action

Tracker, there were 424 work stoppages that year involving some 224,000 workers. That was an increase of approximately 52% in work stoppages from the year before.

AFSCME members across the nation went on strike in 2023, and achieved historic victories: Front-line health care workers in Hawaii ratified a new, three-year contract after a nearly two-month strike; school employees in southeastern Ohio also ratified a new contract after a 12-day strike; city workers in San Jose, California, reached an agreement with their employer after a near-unanimous strike vote; and workers of Yamhill County, Oregon, reached an agreement after a five-day strike.

Among the highest profile strikes of 2023 were those involving 75,000 Kaiser Permanente health care workers, who were involved in the largest recorded health care strike in U.S. history; 150,000 auto workers members of United Auto Workers (UAW) against the Big Three manufacturers; and more than 70,000 Hollywood writers and actors (members of two separate unions, the Writers Guild and SAG-AFTRA) against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers.

The surge in worker activism comes at a time when union favorability remains high and more Americans want unions to grow stronger. 



## THRIVE WORKERS SAY NO TO WAGE CUTS

Members of AFSCME Local 2452 at Thrive nursing home in Mundelein are telling management its proposed wage cut is a non-starter.

# RETIREE NOTES

## Busting the myth that all Americans are living longer

OVER AND OVER, AMERICANS have been told that the age of access to a full pension or Social Security benefit should be increased because Americans are living longer.

But not everyone has the means to live as long as some statistics suggest. In the United States, life expectancy is based on wealth, access to health care, demographic factors and location.

“The simple fact is that not all Americans are living longer,” said AFSCME Retirees Chapter 31 President Larry Brown. “If we let this myth propagate, anti-worker and anti-retiree forces will try to use it to increase the age of access to retirement benefits.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the average life expectancy has risen steadily every year since the 1960s until 2012, when it reached a plateau of 77.

In 2019, the number reached a high of 78 years before the pandemic struck and dropped the average by 1.5 years. Life expectancy in the U.S. has yet to return to its pre-pandemic level.

Even with our relatively high average, American life expectancy is still behind those of other wealthy nations. A report from the National Academy of Sciences showed that across every demographic group, Americans die at younger ages than citizens of other wealthy countries.

And a recent report from the CDC shows that life expectancy is lower for individuals who are lower on the socioeconomic ladder, a gap that has continued to widen in recent decades.

Poorer Americans tend to have shorter life expectancies due to a variety of economic factors, including a lack of reliable and affordable health care, medicine, and healthy food.

“When Social Security benefits are measured on a lifetime basis, low earners, who show little to no gains in life expectancy over time, are projected to receive increasingly lower benefits than

those with high earnings,” the report says.

As a result, commonly discussed changes to Social Security that involve increasing the retirement age would affect low earners disproportionately, the report concludes.

Even so, extremists in Congress continue to introduce proposals that would increase the age of eligibility for all Americans (such as H.R. 5779, sponsored by Republican Congressman Mark Huizenga of Michigan, to create a Fiscal Commission with the goal of squeezing every possible dollar of savings out of Social Security and Medicare without consideration for the adequacy of benefits).

“It’s more important than ever for us to set the record straight that not all Americans are living longer,” Chapter 31 President Brown said. “When they talk about increasing the age of access to Social Security, what they’re

really saying is that they don’t want the lowest-earning retirees to have a full retirement.”

## Fraud schemes against seniors growing more common

A NEWLY RELEASED REPORT from the FBI found that elder fraud crimes occurred more frequently last year than in any other year and accounted for \$3.4 billion in total reported losses. Schemes targeting seniors in the U.S. increased 14% from 2022 to 2023.

In all, more than 100,000 complaints of fraud perpetrated against individuals over 60 years of age were reported to federal law enforcement last year, the most of any age group.

Among the most common were individuals falsely

acting as tech support, fake investment sales and romance schemes. Investment scams are the costliest type, investigators reported.

The average amount lost in 2023 was \$33,915, with nearly 6,000 victims losing more than \$100,000 each.

There are ways to protect yourself from falling victim to one of these scams.

- Appoint a trusted contact to have view-only access to your accounts and investments. A trusted loved one could notice suspicious activity on your accounts that you may not have caught.
- Sign up for a service that tracks your bank accounts and credit cards. Services like LifeLock can detect suspicious activity on your accounts and can help protect your identity if it becomes compromised.
- Maintain close contact with your loved ones. They’ll be able to tell if something is wrong.

The Illinois Attorney General works with the FBI and other agencies to find and take legal action against those who prey on seniors. The Attorney General’s office provides a Senior Citizens Consumer Fraud Helpline.

To contact the hotline, please call 1-800-243-5377 or email [seniorhelpline@ilag.gov](mailto:seniorhelpline@ilag.gov)



## SUB-CHAPTER 86 ENJOYS THE OUTDOORS

Ryan Rempfer and Tom McLaughlin, members of AFSCME Retirees Sub-chapter 86, were among those who participated in the springtime walks sponsored by the sub-chapter. Together, they walked through Washington Park in Springfield, enjoying the crisp spring weather and building solidarity with every step.



# Tara Ferguson

REGISTERED NURSE/DIRECTOR OF HOME HEALTH  
FRANKLIN-WILLIAMSON BI-COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

## AFSCME Local 3369-2

### What do you do at the Franklin-Williamson County Health Department?

A typical day for me is spent in the office, running schedules, following up on patient care, making sure patients are scheduled for the care they need.

We serve everybody from geriatrics to pediatrics, every age group. We perform complicated wound care, IV therapy, and physical therapy. All of our care is done in the home, and our goal is always to keep people out of the hospital and in their homes.

Being an advocate for our patients is a huge part of our job. Maybe they don't have someone close to them to advocate for them. Maybe they don't have access to the internet where they can learn about their health problems. Maybe they don't have education.

### Do you find joy in your job?

It's very gratifying to see you're helping a patient overcome being sick. It's very gratifying as a nurse to be able to do that.

We are one of the only agencies from my county south that accepts Medicaid. Nobody else will take it, so we'll see everyone. What we do is so important nowadays.

### Are there any particular challenges of providing home health care in a rural setting?

Most of our patients live in very rural areas. We do what we have to do to get them the care they need. Terrain can be rough in the winter months. It's windy, there are secluded roads—sometimes so secluded that EMS has a hard time finding homes. When we run labs on patients, we have to be careful to make sure they don't go bad before we get them to a hospital setting.

Physician access is horrible in our area. We just don't have it here. The only way is if you call a doctor's office and be very adamant and say I'm not hanging up until I get through. That's just the way it is here. From the financial side of things, we get penalized for every patient that gets admitted to the ER.

### How does a public health department like yours provide the best possible care?

When I first started, I worked for a private provider. It started as a little home health agency but shortly after, they went corporate. After spending some time with them and seeing where their morals were at, it was all about the dollar signs, and I left because of that.

Then I saw the ad about the health department position. My administrators' values were right there on par with mine. We're all about taking care of patients. If we go into a client's home and see we need to spend two hours with them, we're going to do that, because we're about making sure that they get the best care possible. With corporate agencies, they want you to see seven to eight patients a day within a 100-mile radius. We're just not going to work like that. We are about patient care above all else.

### How does your union help you?

My family is all union. My dad was a union electrician, and I saw how amazing he was treated because of the union.

The union brings fairness, more stability and helps make sure expectations are clearly defined.

I stand up for all of the home health nurses. Our workplace organized in 2020 and we got our first contract in 2021, and through the union we were able to advocate for better wages, time off, and on-call pay rights. 