

ON THE MOVE



Art Institute Workers Win First Contract

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ON THE MOVE

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

AFSCME is "One Strong Union"



BY ROBERTA LYNCH

**UNITY.
A COMMON
PURPOSE.
POWER IN
NUMBERS.**

In just a few short weeks, hundreds of delegates and guests representing AFSCME local unions in every corner of Illinois will converge on Springfield for Council 31's biennial convention.

The convention theme this year is "One Strong Union." AFSCME local unions, leaders and rank-and-file activists show every day what that means: Unity. A common purpose. Power in numbers. The knowledge that we all do better when we all do better, and the grit to stick together, one day longer, when the going gets tough.

Of course, we can only be One Strong Union at the council level because we are comprised of hundreds of strong unions at the local level. And each local can only be One Strong Union because of members who are committed, informed, and involved.

Paging through this issue of *On the Move*, you will see the theme in action time and again. In the joy and pride of members marching together on Labor Day. In the newly organized union members winning their very first contracts.

You see it in Urbana-Champaign, where it took One Strong Union to stop the layoff of an AFSCME member at the university library. In Schaumburg and Springfield, where locals used the grievance procedure to enforce our contracts and win justice for members.

You see it in the rank-and-file leaders getting elected to represent their coworkers on the boards of public pension funds, in the AFSCME members testifying to the General Assembly about the need to improve Tier II pension benefits, and in our work all across the state to address the crisis of understaffing by letting our friends and neighbors know about the thousands of good union jobs available in public service.

We also see the theme One Strong Union in action across so many important battles we've waged and won, big and small, throughout the last two years.

That strength in solidarity is how AFSCME members in

the city of Chicago won their new contract. "One Strong Union means to me that we're sticking together to get what we need," Local 1669 President Denise Williams says. "The impact is better when we come together and have one voice."

The same unity and purpose produced the new agreement for state of Illinois employees, members of the bargaining committee agree. Tim Bowden, vice president of Local 494 at Pontiac Correctional Center, says, "One person doesn't make a union. Everybody has a part and we all work together. We will stand together, we will fight together, we will do anything for the collective whole to make all working people's lives better."

"Being One Strong Union means it doesn't matter what agency you work for, who you are or what you do, we're all in this together," says Local 2615 Vice President April Smith, a state human service caseworker in Rock Island County. "We're all bettering the lives of each other and all the residents of Illinois."

Working together as One Strong Union is also how direct support professionals (DSPs) have made strides to raise their wages. They're employed by dozens of different agencies that serve individuals with disabilities, but they've made progress for all by raising their voices as one through AFSCME.

DSP Christine Rivera, secretary and a steward with Local 3492 at Ray Graham Association, says, "People are living better lives. We're starting to get paid what we deserve. And I know that in the future, it's just going to get better, because there's more and more people seeing that strength in numbers does make a difference."



And naturally, new unions can't be born without a coming together of workers who were previously kept apart, often on purpose, by their bosses.

"One Strong Union means to me that as many people as possible are included, and they all feel like their voice is heard," says Myia Brown, a member of the AFSCME bargaining committee at the Art Institute of Chicago, where workers formed their union just a year ago. "It's a lot of community, a lot of love—and I have a lot more brothers and sisters out of this experience, after organizing."

It's critically important to remember that being One Strong Union isn't a snapshot frozen at a moment in time. It's a continuous process that's always ongoing.

As we attend our union meetings, read our union newsletters or emails, take action alongside our coworkers or join other locals in solidarity, we are building our union stronger. The powerful forces against us never let up, so we have to constantly reinforce our unity and strength too.

As we do, I'm confident in the knowledge that AFSCME—from the smallest local union to our statewide council and nationwide—will continue to be One Strong Union.

As Local 3654 President Lynn Fields from Southwestern Illinois Correctional Center says so powerfully, "AFSCME is about solidarity and liberation for the working class, full stop. Our history proves it, going all the way back to the sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. We're the biggest, we're the baddest, and we're the strongest. AFSCME is One Strong Union."

Will County members ratify six new contracts

Six bargaining units under the umbrella of AFSCME Local 1028 in Will County government fought for and won fair contracts for all.

More than 1,000 AFSCME members work for Will County. Their employers are the Highway Department, the Clerk of the Circuit Court, the Sheriff, the Health Department, and the Sunny Hill Nursing Home.

All six bargaining units negotiated their contracts separately. Certain provisions in an executive contract, like insurance costs and wage increases, apply to members across all units.

“This is by far the best contract we’ve ever had.”

Minda Williamson, the president of Local 1028 and a certified nursing assistant (CNA) at the nursing home, was on the bargaining teams for all six contracts. It was a lengthy process—bargaining began in 2021 and took until summer 2023—but worth the wait.

“I’ve been with the county for 15 years, and this is by far the best contract we’ve ever had,” Williamson said.

Provisions include across-the-board wage increases of 13.5% through 2024 and a contract signing bonus of \$1,000. Four weeks of paid parental leave after the birth or adoption of a child is another major win; previously, Will County did not offer any paid parental leave.

The biggest battle was fought over management’s proposed increases to health insurance premiums and out-of-pocket costs. They demanded a 5-6% increase in premiums, significantly higher copays, and 100% increases to prescription drug costs and out-of-pocket maximums.

Through tough negotiations, the union bargaining committee was able to get management to back off those proposals, ultimately agreeing to a modest 2% increase in premiums, with a 1% increase coming in each year of the contract.

“We are all one and together we are stronger,” said Veronica Perez, a deputy clerk and chief steward at the Circuit Clerk’s office. “We’re all on one team working towards the same goal.

We’re here to try to make work a little better.”

One big priority for the bargaining committees was to boost wages for care workers at the Sunny Hill Nursing Home. After COVID drove up CNA wages at other nursing homes, staffing levels at Sunny Hill were hit hard: On any given midnight shift, as many as 83% of the CNA positions are vacant. The local union resolved to push for better pay to keep pace.

At the bargaining table, they spent hours demanding higher starting wages for nursing staff in order to get more people in the door. It was an issue of respect and fairness for the employees, and a concern for the quality of care available to the home’s residents.

The end result was a nearly 25% pay increase for Sunny Hill CNAs and 21% for RNs. Members in the health department and chief judge’s office also received baseline wage increases of 21%. In addition to the signing bonus, RNs will get a \$750 compression bonus, and all employees at the top of the wage scale receive an additional \$1,500.

Correctional officers at the Will County Jail will receive an across-the-board wage increase of 3.75% retroactive to December 2021, and an additional wage adjustment between 8.5-12%, depending on their current step, retroactive to December 2022.

“The outcome has just motivated us all to do better,” Perez said. “We look at the final result and say, ‘Wow. I helped do that. We all helped do that.’ It’s one of the best contracts we’ve seen.”

“A lot of people I work with thanked me for being in there to fight for what we were asking for. I got quite a few thank-you letters from the bailiffs who were thankful for the things we got done,” said Brandy Whennen, a bailiff at the Will County courthouse. “Everybody had our back 110%.”

Negotiations for all six contracts under Local 1028 were led by Council 31 Staff Representative Christian Hains and included representatives from each of the six bargaining units.

CELEBRATING LABOR DAY

AFSCME members from Galesburg to Rockford turned out at their local Labor Day festivities to celebrate how far workers have come, and to recognize that there is much more work to do to ensure fairness and respect in the workplace.



Study highlights need for action on pay at public universities

A new study from the University of Illinois School of Labor and Employment Relations and the Illinois Economic Policy Institute shows that full-time non-instructional employees at public universities and community colleges earn 17% less than similar positions in state government.

The study compares the average wages for 69 job titles at universities with those same job titles in state government. In 86% of those job titles, public university employees earned less than their counterparts in state government.

The study points out that this pay disparity puts public universities at a disadvantage when it comes to recruitment and retention, exacerbating the staffing crisis that exists at universities across the state, and calls on lawmakers to address

the disparity by increasing funding for public universities.

“Because public universities—like the state agencies to which they are compared in this analysis—are supported with public funds, elected officials should consider exploring ways to eliminate this wage gap and ensure that these institutions are positioned to compete for the workers needed to serve Illinois students and campus communities,” the study concludes.

“Workers at public universities have been earning too little for too long,” Council 31 Executive Director Roberta Lynch said. “This research shows how serious the issue is. State lawmakers and university

leaders should take immediate steps to ensure that public universities have the funding they need to address these serious inequities while AFSCME continues to fight for better pay at the bargaining table.”

“AFSCME worked to ensure that the authors of the study had accurate data to rely on, and Council 31 intends to use the conclusions drawn in this study to push for parity with state employees,” Lynch continued.

Public universities contribute massive economic value to the state’s economy. The study found that the University of Illinois system alone contributes \$19 billion to the state’s GDP annually. But little of that

enormous sum has so far translated into higher earnings for the public university employees who make those institutions work.

The issue is not just a matter of fairness. Increasing pay for university employees would have an outsized economic effect on working-class college towns throughout the state, the study found.

“[Low wages] ultimately result in [university workers] having less disposable income to spend at local businesses—affecting local economic development in places like Urbana-Champaign, Normal, Charleston, Macomb, Carbondale and Edwardsville,” according to the study. 

U of I members rally to save coworker’s job

Members of AFSCME Locals 3700 and 698 at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign fought back against the threatened layoff of a beloved colleague, taking forceful action until the administration relented and reversed course.

“I am very thankful for everyone involved in helping me find a new position,” Catherine Nguyen said. “The layoff was very hard for me to deal with, but with the help of AFSCME, my family, and everyone who supported me, I was able to get through this tough situation.”

Several months ago, university administration notified the local union of its intent to lay Catherine off. She had been a library clerk at the university’s main library for more than 10 years and had worked at the university even longer on a part-time basis.

“They have 400 student workers in that library,” said Andrew Torrey, chief steward and vice president of AFSCME Local 3700. “You mean to tell us there wasn’t 37.5 hours of work consistent with what Catherine was doing? Our union’s position was that that’s

a load of baloney.”

Catherine is a first-generation American and a person of color who lives with cognitive challenges. She had always done her job with pride, and consistently received stellar performance reviews.

Union members were disturbed that Catherine was targeted for a layoff—especially since management and the union had worked together through the pandemic to avoid even a single member being laid off. They said it “clashed with their shared values of accessibility, diversity, equity and inclusion.”

The U of I has a proud and celebrated history of accommodating people with disabilities. After World War II, when soldiers suffering the scars of battle returned home and used the GI Bill to attend college, the university led the charge

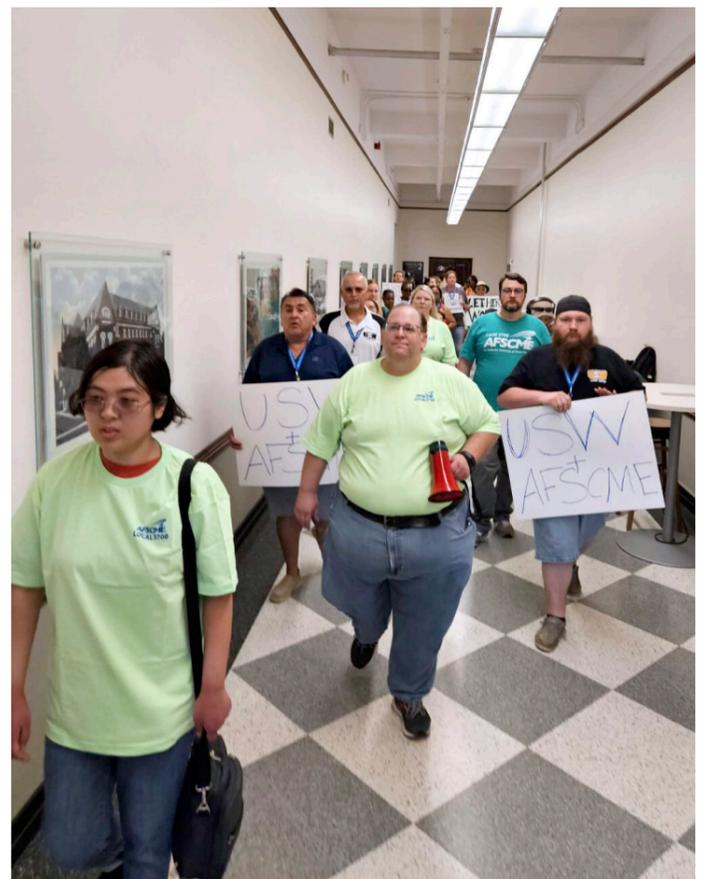
in making their community amenable to their needs.

“This university has been at the forefront of accessibility for more than 80 years,” said Torrey said. “To think that they would be firing someone who was disabled, who had accommodations, who had been at the university for 10 years, completely shocked and disappointed us.”

The union negotiated with management, trying to find a solution that allowed Catherine to keep her job. But as time wore on, they knew they needed to bring this fight to the broader community.

On July 19, AFSCME members organized a protest outside the main library before delivering the hundreds of signatures they collected on a petition calling on the university to reverse the decision. Dozens of union members from the graduate students’ union, the faculty union, SEIU and even some visiting members of the United Steelworkers joined with AFSCME to make their voices heard.

“That other union members came out was really touching,” said Local 3700 President Greg Brannon. “They had never met her. They didn’t know who she was. They didn’t know all



Union members march through the university’s halls to deliver petitions to the dean.

the details. They just knew that there was an injustice being done and they stood in solidarity to fight against the injustice.”

The picket attracted the attention of the news media, which put more pressure on the university.

Only two days later the union reached an agreement that saved Catherine’s job. She returned to work at another library on campus with no loss of seniority or benefits.

“It’s a great demonstration that the union has power and

if we exert it, we can make changes,” said Ben Riegler, president of AFSCME Local 698. “If no one had stood up, the university wouldn’t have given Catherine a second thought. They would have been happy with having an employee out on the street.”

“Now Catherine’s work—and her future—is safe,” said her mother, Duyen, herself a library retiree. “The will and the knowledge of the union works for people with less power, and it worked for Catherine.” 



Shane Wagner, a member of AFSCME Local 424 and an educator at Chester Mental Health Center, testifies before the House Personnel and Pensions Committee on Tier 2 changes on Sept. 6.

Push is on to improve Tier 2 pensions

A FSCME members and Council 31 legislative and policy staff made their voices heard before the state House Personnel and Pensions Committee at a legislative hearing in Chicago on September 6.

They were there to testify on House Bills 4098 and 4099, legislation to make important changes to Tier 2 pension benefits for participants in the State Employees Retirement System (SERS), the State University Retirement System (SURS), and other state-funded pension systems. AFSCME has provided similar testimony during a series of subject-matter hearings conducted this summer on these bills and Tier 2 pension benefits in general.

HB 4098 would accomplish several improvements to Tier 2. Those include adding a deferred retirement option, expanding pension buyouts, lowering the normal retirement age for employees based on years of service, and enhancing annual annuity increases in retirement. The bill also requires that the state fully fund the pension systems by the year 2050.

HB 4099 is targeted specifically towards Tier 2 law enforcement employees in the SERS alternative formula. If passed, it would re-establish equity for correctional employees in IDOC and security employees in the Department of Juvenile Justice and DHS. This includes both restoring alternative formula status for security employees in DHS and reducing the retirement age to 55 with 20 years of service, mirroring other law enforcement titles in the alternative formula. Employee classifications in DOC and DJJ are the only law enforcement jobs in the alternative formula that still have a retirement age set at 60; because security employees in DHS were incorrectly removed from the alternative formula, their normal retirement age is currently 67.

"AFSCME supports making adjustments to the Tier 2

alternative formula to re-establish equity with others in law enforcement regarding retirement age," Council 31 Director of Research and Employee Benefits Martha Merrill said in supporting the bills. "These changes are not only a matter of fairness, but are also closely connected to safety and staffing."

AFSCME members Charles Mathis (a correctional officer at Stateville Correctional Center)

"These changes are not only a matter of fairness, but are closely connected to safety and staffing."

and Shane Wagner (an educator at Chester Mental Health Center) also testified before the committee.

Mathis said that the Tier 2 retirement age creates very real safety risks for security employees in DOC, DJJ and DHS.

"Having 60-year-old security personnel raises questions about safety within our facilities—not only for staff, but for the population that is housed there," Mathis told the committee. "It is only appropriate that the General Assembly take

action to adjust the retirement age for Tier 2 security employees in DOC and DJJ to age 55."

Wagner, who has worked as a security therapy aide and, more recently, as an educator for 12 years, described how his work closely mirrors that of law enforcement personnel in corrections.

"DHS security facilities are structured similarly to correctional facilities and work performed by staff closely

resembles that of correctional officers," Wagner said. "Staff follow many of the same rigorous security protocols and precautions used in correctional facilities."

Despite this, DHS security employees were removed from the alternative formula, which Wagner said has further hurt the DHS's ability to recruit and retain staff. One side effect is the creation of a revolving-door of new employees, who don't see a future with the department.

"Tier 2 staff are fully

cognizant that they are not getting the same retirement benefit as long-term security employees in DHS, or other correctional employees in DOC," Wagner said. "When I started in 2011, the pension benefit was a strong incentive for employees to remain in their jobs. Now it is increasingly difficult to get trainees to stay."

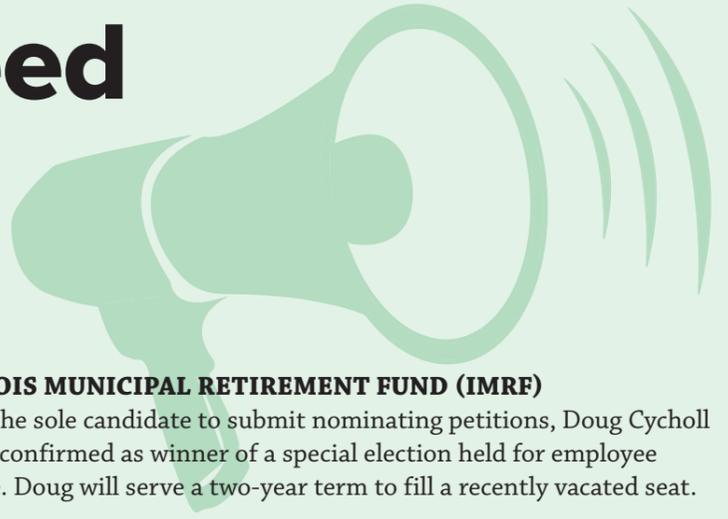
"Frankly, it is not possible, nor is it safe, for security employees in DHS to do this work until age 67, which is the normal retirement age under the regular formula," Wagner said. "Even working until age 60 is of concern given the physical and emotional toll this work can have on staff."

Some state lawmakers on the committee agreed that Tier 2 is unfair and damages the state's workforce.

"Everything you have said is spot on—it is unfair," said state Rep. Steve Reick. "I will be the first to say that. We do need [...] to provide a retirement benefit that will attract and retain employees over the long haul."

AFSCME's legislative team will monitor all developments with the two bills and stands ready to fight for the legislative fixes needed to correct the inequities of Tier 2. 

Pension boards need union voices



Pension benefits are vital to the retirement security of public employees. AFSCME has always sought to strengthen Illinois' public pension funds by working to elect union members who will serve as a strong voice for front-line employees on pension fund boards.



ILLINOIS MUNICIPAL RETIREMENT FUND (IMRF)

Being the sole candidate to submit nominating petitions, Doug Cycholl will be confirmed as winner of a special election held for employee trustee. Doug will serve a two-year term to fill a recently vacated seat.

Doug Cycholl works as a Crew Foreman in the Water Division for City Water, Light and Power in Springfield. Doug is an experienced advocate and union leader. He currently serves as president of AFSCME Local 337, Springfield City Water, Light and Power Employees, and has previously held both treasurer and vice president positions within the local. Doug has experience representing employee interests, having sat on multiple bargaining committees, and currently representing AFSCME on the Springfield joint insurance benefits committee. In addition, Doug is a delegate to the Central Labor Council and a longtime activist in Springfield local politics.

Trustees elected by employees and annuitants work to represent the rights and interests of participants in the decision making of the Fund and voting for these representatives is an important participant right. This fall two pension funds elected AFSCME members to serve as trustees.



COOK COUNTY PENSION FUND (CCPF)

As the sole candidate for the Cook County Employee seat up for election in 2023, Kevin Ochalla was declared the winner and re-elected to the board. Ochalla was first elected back in 2017 and is the first AFSCME member to serve on the Cook County Pension Fund Board.

Kevin Ochalla has served as an assistant public defender in Cook County for over 20 years and is president of AFSCME Local 3315. In both roles Kevin has shown an unwavering commitment to protecting and defending the rights of individuals. Over the last six years serving as trustee, Kevin has been an active and outspoken voice on various issues of concern, from legislation impacting the funding and administration of the pension fund to retiree health insurance. Over his tenure as trustee, Kevin has become a leader on the board, and a reliable advocate when issues arise. Kevin remains firm in his commitment to amplifying the interests of all Cook County employees in the decision making of the board. 

Grievance process wins member's job back, restores wrongly denied sick pay

The grievance process gives AFSCME members a tool to fight back and make their case in all disciplinary processes. Denise Matthew and Tom Todd both fought back against injustice in their workplaces—and won.

Winning payment for 1,900 hours of sick leave

Tom Todd was a forensic technician at the Village of Schaumburg police department for 33 years. His union, AFSCME Local 1919, had specific language in its contract providing that when an employee had 20 or more years of service and more than 800 hours of sick time, the employer had to pay out 50% of the accumulated sick time upon

retirement or resignation.

A faithful employee for all those years, Todd only used sick time if he desperately needed it. When he decided to leave the village for a new position, he had accumulated 1,910 hours of sick leave—worth almost \$40,000.

He had been counting on that money to bridge the gap between his retirement and Medicare eligibility. Then the village told him they weren't going to pay out his sick time as the contract required.

That's when his AFSCME staff representative stepped in to file a grievance on his behalf. The union won, and the village was ordered to pay.

"Why should I have walked away from something that I worked for, something that I earned?" Todd said. "Part of the reason I wanted to fight this was to set a precedent. Now they can't do this to anyone else."

Member wins job back through grievance process

As part of Denise Matthew's duties as an Executive II with the Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board, she was tasked with processing grant applications according to the rules laid out for those grants.

One day, she received a local police department's invoice for grant funding for leased camera equipment. Under the state's rules, grant funding can only be disbursed for equipment that is owned, not leased.

So, following the state comptroller's rules and the requirements laid out for that specific grant, Matthew explained that the necessary paperwork was not attached, and thus payment of the grant funds would not be in accordance with the rules. Matthew's supervisor still instructed her to make the payment.

When she still declined because the requirements weren't being complied with, the agency's deputy director determined her to be "insubordinate" and suspended her for five days.

After her suspension, the state decided to terminate her for yet another alleged instance of "insubordination," which an arbitrator later said amounted to a "gotcha effort" on the part of the agency. After that, her union—AFSCME Local 1019—promptly filed a grievance that eventually went to arbitration.

In the end, an arbitrator found that both her five-day suspension and her termination were unjustified. She won her job back and the state was ordered to restore the pay and benefits she missed during the year-and-a-half long grievance process.

"I know it's difficult for most state employees to fight for a year and a half," Matthew said. "But I think even if I had lost, I know that by fighting back, I did the right thing." 

Caring every day

AFSCME members in IDHS forge close bonds with individuals in their care

When Roberta Sneddon was pregnant with her first son, months came and went before she had picked out a name for him.

Then the topic came up in a group discussion with residents of the Choate Mental Health and Developmental Center where Sneddon has worked for decades as a vocational instructor.

One resident chimed in.

“How about Zachary?” she asked. It was a name that Sneddon had not considered before.

It is not uncommon for the individuals with developmental disabilities at Illinois Department of Human Services residential facilities to become like family to the people who work there. In Roberta’s case, that bond was realized.



Choate workers take the center’s residents on a picnic outing this summer.

Her son, Zachary, now 19 years old, is living proof.

DHS facilities have become the target of unrelenting attacks by the media. Missing or ignored in these accounts are the stories of DHS workers’ deep commitment, personal sacrifices, and strong desire to improve the lives of the individuals they support, despite challenges like staffing shortages.

“There’s a lot of success stories that don’t get told,” said Tina Winfield, president of AFSCME Local 141 at Choate.

DHS has nearly 2,000 vacant positions. Those vacancies have real consequences for residents and staff. In August, Choate employees spent hours planning an outing for the residents to the Centralia Balloon Fest—an annual event with live music, local vendors and dozens of hot-air balloons—but this year, the outing had to be cancelled due to a shortage of staff.

“It can make us feel like the bad guys,” Winfield said. “Our individuals look forward to this outing for weeks, and they don’t know that it’s not our fault they can’t go. When things like this happen, it makes us feel like we’re disappointing them, and that’s bad for morale across the board.”

Understaffing also puts residents’ safety at risk. A Mental Health Technician III at Murray Developmental Center and a member of AFSCME Local 401, Tyson Bargh says that under normal conditions, at least two staff members would be on hand to take an individual to an appointment off-site. Now, they often only have enough staff for one.

Yet time and again, AFSCME members in DHS say that the individuals in their care are like their family. In many cases, partially because of understaffing and partially due to the demands of the job, staff spend more time

with them than they do their actual family.

“Some of our residents look to us to replace something they’re missing in their life,” Bargh said. “Often they haven’t had a phone call in years, and they see other residents who have visits every week. They’re feeling that empty space in their lives. It’s up to us to fill that space.”

Bargh has formed deeply personal relationships with everyone he cares for at Murray. When they go out for walks, they always look forward to visiting his wife, who also works at the facility in an administrative role. They know his kids’ names. They even know his dogs’ names.

Danny Williams, a Mental Health Technician IV at Shapiro Developmental Center in Kankakee, has worked for DHS for 40 years. In that time, he’s worked with hundreds of individuals with disabilities. He tries to make a positive impact on each and every one of them, and is still surprised by how often they make a mark on him, too.

“I would like the public to know that a lot of people have forgotten about these individuals,” Williams said.



Cathy Thompson, a licensed nurse practitioner at Choate, checks the blood pressure of one of the center’s residents.

“People don’t realize that often there’s no one else in their lives that can care for them besides us. A lot of

them don’t have families. But when they come here, then they suddenly have another family—us.”



AFSCME SHOWS SOLIDARITY FOR STRIKING NURSES

Members from multiple AFSCME locals showed up in solidarity to a rally on August 25 for striking members of the Illinois Nurses Association at Ascension St. Joseph Hospital in Joliet as they fight for better pay and safe staffing levels.

AFSCME COMBATS STAFFING CRISIS

Raising pay

We know that the best way to hire is to offer competitive wages. With each new contract, we are one step closer to improving staffing.

Labor-management committees on recruitment and retention

In the new State of Illinois Master Contract, AFSCME and the state agreed to meet regularly to identify and overcome roadblocks to hiring in high-vacancy titles.

Modernizing hiring processes

AFSCME is working with employers to reduce barriers of entry to public service jobs and encourage embracing modern electronic hiring processes.

HELP WANTED

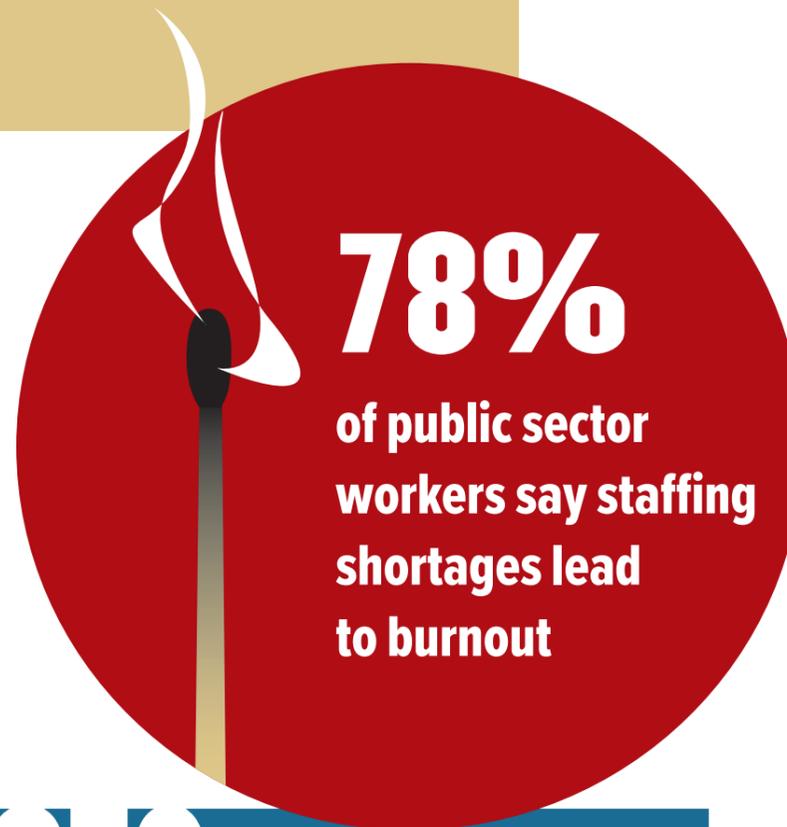
Across the country, states, cities and towns are facing massive staffing shortages. The situation in Illinois is no different. Public service workers at every level of government are on the job around the clock, caring for our communities and responding to emergencies. But they need help.

Pandemic job cuts and hiring freezes slashed the public service workforce. Today, the public sector—including teachers, firefighters, probation officers, school bus drivers, CNAs and many more—is still hundreds of thousands of jobs short of pre-pandemic levels. Hiring isn't

happening fast enough to fill vacancies, which is putting a strain on the everyday heroes who keep our communities running.

Council 31 is pressing governmental entities large and small to modernize their hiring systems and work harder to recruit qualified candidates. Progress has been made, but true change has been far too slow.

AFSCME members have had to cope with the dire effects of the staffing crisis for going on two years—often being forced to work excessive



TED!

Spread the Word: Public Service Matters!

amounts of overtime on a regular basis. It's cost precious time that could have otherwise been spent at Little League games and birthday parties. It's taken a toll on our mental well-being and our ability to perform our jobs to the best of our abilities.

In the pages of *On the Move* over the last several months, readers have seen firsthand accounts of the staffing crisis from their fellow union members. AFSCME members have reported crushing overtime; one correctional officer reported routinely working between

50-80 hours of overtime every two weeks. Excessive mandatory overtime has caused marriages to suffer and led to more stress-related illnesses and substance abuse.

Now, AFSCME International has launched a nationwide "Staff the Front Lines" campaign to raise awareness of this crisis and boost hiring in the public service across the country. The moment is ripe to rebuild the public service workforce in states, cities and towns, school districts, residential care facilities, and everywhere in between.

It's time for each of us to take up the mantle. Let friends and family know that there are thousands of available jobs in the public service that make great careers and offer the stability they need to provide for themselves and their families.

**Let's spread the word together!
Public service offers good
union jobs with fair pay and
attractive benefits.**



Sam Doty

911 Dispatcher,
City of DeKalb
Local 813

There are only eight employees in DeKalb's 911 dispatch. There are 16 total full-time positions.

"We all enjoy that no shift is the same. In the office, we work well together and have a tight connection. We enjoy serving the people that need help because they have no one else to turn to. A lot of people are dependent on the public sector to help with the serious issues that they have never dealt with before. We have great benefits we have fought for and continuously try to make our jobs better. The job is stressful, but it is equally rewarding."



Lynn Fields

Correctional Lieutenant,
Southwestern
Correctional Center,
East St. Louis
Local 3654

Southwestern Correctional Center is currently short approximately 50 correctional officers, and there are even more office and support staff vacancies.

"If you have a love for service and a love for people, this is a great job. It's a blessing to have this job because you get to see the impact you have on those you work with. Providing correctional and rehabilitation services to people, you have no idea how well you're able to help people until you see it firsthand. We're compensated well, and there are plenty of opportunities for advancement."



Demetrius Brown

School Bus Driver, Joliet
Township High School
Local 197

Joliet Township High School typically has 110 bus drivers. Today, they have only 80.

"Once you get into the job, there are all sorts of extra ways you can make money, like washing the buses and going around and checking the oil. We have full benefits through our union contract, plus you get an extra \$75 per week for showing up to work. If you like working with kids, this is the job for you."



Carmen Carter

Security Therapy Aide
II, Elgin Mental Health
Center
Local 26

Elgin is short 100 staff members. Nearly half of the vacancies are for security therapy aides.

"It's fulfilling to be there and be a part of helping and engaging with the patients. The pay is good because of the union. Between all the paid holidays and vacation days, you're able to build and grow your family. I've been there 13 years, and since then, I've been able to accomplish a lot of things that I wouldn't have been able to do without a union job."



Chuck Carver

Building Service Worker,
Illinois State University,
Bloomington
Local 1110

At full staffing, ISU normally has 110 building service workers. Thirty of those positions are currently vacant.

"Illinois State is an awesome place to work, and our union is continuously trying to make it even better. Our benefits are really good and the union gives you protection. You get to meet people every day that you would normally never meet. You come to work and even if you're feeling down, you see the students' positive outlook, and it just lifts you back up again."



Jacob Cleary

Librarian IV, Chicago
Public Library
Local 1215

Of the 1,150 funded full-time employees in the Chicago Public Library system, nearly 250 of them are currently vacant.

"Working with the public at Chicago Public Libraries and providing library services in every Chicago neighborhood is a rewarding experience. You get to help people read, learn and discover through their lives. If you enjoy working with the public, you would enjoy working at CPL. You would also enjoy the strong wages and benefits that our union has won for CPL employees."

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

- **Spread the word!** Share these stories with your friends and family. For more information on how to apply for the jobs detailed here, visit [AFSCME31.org/HelpWanted](https://www.afscme31.org/HelpWanted)
- Let Council 31 know about staffing shortages in your workplace. Email webaction@afscme31.org and describe the staffing situation at your job and how it impacts your personal and professional life.

AFSCME members welcome students back to school

The beginning of each school year brings new faces, opportunities and challenges. AFSCME members who work in early childhood and K-12 education are teachers, school bus drivers, maintenance workers, social workers and more. Oftentimes, they're the first person a student sees in the morning and the last one they see at the end of the day.

There's more that goes into welcoming kids back to school than meets the eye. In communities across Illinois, AFSCME members are there making it happen.



Bob Schultz
AFSCME LOCAL 2040
EAST MOLINE SCHOOL DISTRICT
MAINTENANCE WORKER

In maintenance, the work goes year-round. Over the summer, we work on a lot of projects that get put on the back burner while the kids are still running around the school. Rehabbing older rooms, installing new cabinets and countertops, maintaining the heating and cooling systems—and that's all in between all of the repair calls we get.

The first week is always chaos. But truly seeing all the kids come back is just great and believe it or not, the kids are happy to be back at school. There's a lot of energy, and it's refreshing for us to see all that energy running around. The kindergarteners are so cute and they've never been to school; they think it's the greatest thing in the world.

We're there because we want to make sure the kids have safe and comfortable environments. Everyone does better when they are safe and comfortable. For some kids, going to school is the best part of their day and we do everything we can to make sure their environment is fit for learning.



Stephanie Anson
AFSCME LOCAL 822
ROCK ISLAND SCHOOL DISTRICT
NUTRITION SERVICES

This school year has already been a challenge because we started in our brand-new kitchen. The new kitchen is centrally located for all the schools in the district; we used to have three kitchens spread out throughout the area. So we've had to learn how to operate the brand new equipment while serving over 3,000 students per day—and that's just for lunch.

Being in the new location, we all definitely miss the students. I grew very fond of the kids. There's quite a few that I miss dearly.

Everyone in my kitchen takes pride in what we do and what we're sending out. We wouldn't be comfortable sending out anything that we wouldn't feed to our own family because in a sense these kids are our own family.



Amber Bueno
AFSCME LOCAL 900-B
CHAMPAIGN SCHOOL DISTRICT
FAMILY ADVOCATE

Once school starts, we shift our focus to doing home visits with parents around the end of September. We work with them to make sure they have all their needs met, connect them to any support or resources they need; it could be helping them with referrals or getting food for their family if they need it. We also work on setting goals for the year;

that could be goals for the kids or family goals. We establish that and work with them throughout the year.

It's a lot more fun when the kids come back. During the summer, we're all cooped up in our office doing paperwork. Once the school year starts, it's a lot livelier. When the kids come back, it gives me a reason to escape my office and see more personalities.

It's such a sweet thing when all the kids come back to school and you start forming relationships with them. I don't work with the kids as much as their teachers do, but I try to make my presence felt. When I really get to know a student, and they say, 'Hi, Ms. Amber,' I've created some sort of attachment with them. They know I'm a part of their life. That is such a great feeling.



Charita Jeffery
AFSCME LOCAL 2608
MCLEAN COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT
SCHOOL BUS MONITOR

As a school bus monitor, we transport very precious cargo. We transport children with special needs—it could be a child who is blind or one who has cognitive challenges.

The startup of school is always hectic. We don't know the children and we're trying to learn names and addresses and where they go. It takes some patience. You have to pay attention. Especially the kindergarteners that are coming in, they're crying, they're afraid and they haven't ridden the school bus before. So, it's up to us to make them feel comfortable and set the tone for the rest of their day, because we're the first people they see in the morning.

Sometimes it can be tough to get the kids to warm up to you and make them trust you. I try to just pay extra attention to students who are getting on for the first time. I'll tell them, 'I'm Ms. Charita, and we're going to take you to school today, and I promise you're going to have a good day.' Sometimes they still cry, but after the second or third day, they're good. 🌟

NATIONAL NEWS FOR YOU



NLRB acts to discourage labor law violations

ON AUGUST 25, THE National Labor Relations Board issued a landmark ruling that makes it easier for workers to form a union if their employer commits an unfair labor practice.

The board ruled that when a majority of employees file union cards, the employer can either voluntarily recognize their union or ask the board to run a union-recognition election.

If at any point in the organizing process the employer is found to have committed an unfair labor practice, such as firing pro-union workers, the board will now order the employer to recognize the union without requiring an election.

The ruling restores the principle known as the Joy Silk doctrine, in which the NLRB required that employers must voluntarily recognize unions once they reach majority support unless the employer has a good-faith concern that majority support is not certain.

Up until the 1970s, this principle was the standard in labor organizing.

The decision comes on the heels of another pro-labor NLRB ruling that will accelerate

the timeline between the filing of a representation petition and the beginning of a union election.

White House determined to negotiate Medicare drug prices

WHEN THE INFLATION Reduction Act was signed into law by President Joe Biden, it launched a new initiative that allows Medicare to negotiate the price of certain drugs with big pharmaceutical manufacturers.

The Biden Administration recently unveiled a list of the first 10 drugs it will negotiate over, ranging from diabetes and heart disease treatments to cancer drugs. The list prices for the drugs range from \$500 at minimum to up to \$25,000 in the case of Stelara, which treats arthritis, Crohn's disease and irritable bowel syndrome.

"Big Pharma is charging Americans more than three times what they charge other countries simply because they could, and I think it's outrageous. That's why these negotiations matter," Biden said at an event at the White House.

But Big Pharma has been

fighting tooth and nail to prevent any reduction in prices—in order to protect their huge profits. A group of pharmaceutical companies filed a handful of lawsuits to halt the negotiations before they even begin.

Legal experts believe that these challenges will fail, and that Big Pharma is just buying time so they can continue to profit from exorbitant drug prices.

IRA's benefits felt one year later

ONE YEAR AGO, PRESIDENT Biden signed into law legislation that helped American workers emerge from the pandemic with a wind at their back.

The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) has already proven to be a massive victory for the middle class, growing the U.S. workforce, holding corporations to the same tax standards that regular citizens are, and boosting manufacturing and construction investments across the country.

The legislation also established a 15% minimum corporate tax rate (the largest tax hike on corporations in decades), invested more money for IRS enforcement and imposed a tax on corporations that hoard wealth

through stock buybacks instead of spending that money on raising workers' wages or investing in new research and development.

Tens of billions of dollars in manufacturing tax credits also helped to kickstart U.S. manufacturing of clean-energy production components.

The IRA already has created more than 170,600 new clean-energy jobs, and by 2030, it will result in nearly 1.5 million more while reducing greenhouse gas emissions by nearly 40%.

"It's a big boost for American workers," said Council 31 Research Director Martha Merrill.

Congressional Republicans stare down shutdown

CONGRESS MUST ENACT A budget by September 30, but House Republicans have shown little indication they will do so before the deadline.

When asked about the specter of a government shutdown, Republicans have been cavalier.

"If a shutdown occurs, then so be it," said Rep. Ralph Norman (R-S.C.).

"We should not fear a

government shutdown," Rep. Bob Good (R-Va) said. "Most American people won't even miss it if the government is shut down temporarily."

In reality, government shutdowns are devastating for federal workers who are forced to go without paychecks while the budget is being debated. They can also hurt state and local government workers whose jobs depend on federal funds.

Shutdowns are also costly for taxpayers—that is, everyone—and hurt the economy. A Senate report issued in 2019 found that the "last three government shutdowns cost taxpayers nearly \$4 billion—at least \$3.7 billion in back pay to furloughed federal workers, and at least \$338 million in other costs associated with the shutdowns, including extra administrative work, lost revenue, and late fees on interest payments."

Shutdowns also harm everyday Americans, particularly vulnerable populations, by disrupting services they depend on, such as for veterans and seniors.

Even so, a possible shutdown is being cheered on by the Freedom Caucus, a group of hardline conservatives intent on slashing government services. So a federal government shutdown this fall remains a very real possibility. 

ON THE LOCAL LEVEL



AFSCME members at the Art Institute of Chicago's school and museum pose after an action outside the museum.

Long fight wins first contract for AICWU

MORE THAN 500 WORKERS at the Art Institute of Chicago's museum (AIC) and related school (SAIC)—members of the Art Institute of Chicago Workers United (AICWU/AFSCME)—have won a first contract that provides for wage increases and begins to address critical workplace culture issues that have plagued workers for years.

AIC is home to one of the world's most renowned art collections and SAIC is internationally recognized as one of the best art schools in the country.

A common refrain from cultural workers organizing nationwide is that “we can't eat prestige,” in reference to the idea that prestigious institutions like the Art Institute have tried to justify lower wages and salaries to employees based on how desirable the positions are. One key motive for forming a union with AFSCME was that workers wanted to secure a stronger voice on the job.

Kyla Thomas, a member of the bargaining committee and a manager of distribution operations at AIC's off-site warehouse, says her colleagues at the warehouse have felt disrespected and mistreated by certain managers, and saw discipline meted out in unfair or arbitrary ways. In the past, it's led to people either suffering in silence or simply leaving for

other job opportunities.

Briana Shucart, an admissions technology specialist at SAIC, said she was inspired to join the bargaining committee after seeing how much effort organizers put into generating support for the union and winning the vote.

“You get out of a union what you put into it,” she said. “And I knew I was interested in being a part of that experience.”

Fresh off the victory of their union election in December 2021, those nominated to serve on the bargaining committee were initially optimistic about management's approach to bargaining. But that optimism soon faded as they saw how determined management negotiators were to quibble extensively over minor issues like union bulletin boards and storage space for union materials.

After passing the one-year

anniversary of when they started bargaining and frustrated with how slow things were progressing at the table, the union bargaining committee wanted to send a message that they wouldn't tolerate it anymore. They decided to begin collecting money for a strike fund. To Herb Metzler, a member of the bargaining committee and a technician in the museum's collections department, that was when management's tone at the table began to change.

“That was when the museum came to the table and let us know they wanted to resolve this,” Metzler said. “They started to budge, and we saw them come up on some of the proposals rather than us coming down.”

Within days, they had reached a tentative agreement. The committee unanimously agreed to recommend it to their coworkers and the AICWU

membership subsequently ratified it overwhelmingly.

Under the four-year agreement, wages will increase at least 12.25% and as much as 16.25% across the board, with lower-paid employees receiving higher increases. In addition, the wage floor will rise to \$17 per hour now and \$18 per hour in 2024.

The bargaining committee also won provisions that will help employees build careers, requiring job openings to be posted internally first and qualified in-house applicants will be guaranteed an interview.

And the contract establishes a grievance process and forms standing labor-management committees that will give workers an enhanced voice in departmental policies.

“Now we have a way to say, ‘Hey, you can't do this to me,’” Thomas said. “There will be a union rep by your side in all disciplinary meetings. That's going to be a huge culture shift.”

For now, the new AFSCME members have a lot of work to do to build their union stronger still. The drafting and adoption of a constitution and electing local officers are on the agenda moving forward, along with continued support for their fellow AICWU members in the SAIC non-tenure-track faculty, who are currently bargaining their first contract as well.

“Now we just want to dig our heels in and work together to make this a better place to work for future generations of SAIC and AIC employees,” said Kae Flester, a facilities manager and member of the bargaining

committee.

The AICWU staff bargaining committee was led by Council 31 Regional Director Helen Thornton, Staff Representative Cameron Day and Senior Organizer Dave Bloede, and included Shucart, Flester, Metzler, Thomas, and more than 20 other representatives from the school and museum.

Fair contract for AFSCME members at state tollway

MEMBERS OF AFSCME LOCAL 3883 who work for the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority have won a fair contract that boosts wages for the lowest-paid among their ranks, requires the employer to bargain over changes to remote work, and more.

AFSCME members at the tollway are a unique bunch. Of the 180 of them, there are 68 unique titles. They range from engineers to IT professionals to project planners. It's up to them to make sure that the state's tollways are built properly and maintained well.

Tollway employees are spread out across the state and many of them work remotely, so it was a challenge for the bargaining committee to centralize support for the contract campaign. To bring the contract fight to the upper echelons of tollway management, they decided to attend each monthly



AICWU members kept the pressure on management by staging a number of actions outside the museum throughout the organizing and bargaining phases.

meeting of the tollway's board of directors, with members taking personal time to travel to and make their voices heard at the meetings.

"We are specialists in our industry," Kelsey Musich, a member of the bargaining committee and an environmental planner, told the board at one meeting. "We have a glass ceiling above us but continue to grow within our titles in order to move this agency forward."

From March to August, they went to every meeting and told the board why they deserved the demands they made at the bargaining table. After each session, the tone of negotiations shifted in their favor.

Members of the bargaining committee were especially concerned about wages for customer-service representatives, the public-facing workers who process late or missed toll payments and provide customer support. The local's lowest-paid members, they were suffering the most from high inflation.



Members of the St. Charles Public Library bargaining committee celebrate with a night out after reaching a tentative agreement on their first contract.

won no premium increases to the no-cost HMO plan. For the customer service representatives, the wage floor was increased to \$20 per hour, just as their petition demanded.

and a young adult librarian of 14 years, said one of his key motivations in helping organize the union—and later, serving on the bargaining committee—was to not sit idly by while the library went down a path he wasn't comfortable with.

"I grew up in this city, and my family has lived here since the 1800s," he said. "I feel a connection to this library, and I don't want to be forced out by people who don't care about the community. So we had to make a decision: We could either run or we could fight. We chose to fight."

An important issue was discipline. Workers had no voice, no due process, and no recourse if they were unfairly disciplined. Management unilaterally decided workers were guilty of policy violations without ever properly investigating them.

Records of those alleged violations could sit in an employee's file for years, and would be used against them if management wanted to get rid of them or deny them a promotion. According to organizer and bargaining committee member Sutton Skowron, a six-year adult services librarian, the discipline policies began to drive more and more workers away.

"People would leave and they wouldn't be replaced, and the people who still worked here wouldn't get any more hours," Skowron said. "You were just expected to do more in the same amount of time for the same amount of pay."

All this turmoil hurt the community.

"We're a public organization," Skowron said. "When we're allowed to do our jobs, when we have what we need to do our jobs well, the whole community benefits."

When, after 16 months at the bargaining table, Council 31 Staff Representative and chief negotiator Carla Williams, announced that they had a tentative agreement, the room burst into applause.

"It was just pure joy," Buckley said. "There was a brightness inside me that hadn't been there in a long time. I didn't know how much everything was weighing on me. I just felt lighter. I felt like we got so much in this contract. So many good things were coming our way, it was finally something to look forward to after being so dark for so long."

Over the life of the four-year contract, they won 17% across-the-board wage increases, with additional wage adjustments for six titles. They also secured a ratification bonus equal to 1% of their annual wages.

Now, all staff at the library—full- and part-time—will receive four weeks of paid vacation, plus two personal holidays that can be used at any time and three personal days. They also made important advancements on paid parental leave; where they previously had none, they now have six weeks.

They also made serious progress on ensuring fairer schedules for all. Before the

union, schedules could be changed arbitrarily by managers, leaving parents to scramble for childcare and disrupting the lives of everyone at the library. Now, their union contract ensures that the only time schedules can be changed is if there is a provable operational need.

"You have certain expectations when you go to work at a library. You recognize that you're not going to get rich doing it, but you at least expect to be treated well," Buckley said. "We are all very passionate about the job, but the passion was being sucked out of it."

They won language that makes the disciplinary process fairer and more transparent. Instead of violations remaining in their file forever, now they are automatically expunged after two years, so long as a substantially similar violation does not occur within that time.

The contract was ratified unanimously.

Buckley hopes that other library workers in the area will see the strength they've found through their union and what they were able to accomplish in their first contract, and be inspired to organize their workplaces, too.

"When we meet with new employees to do their union orientation, a lot of them come from libraries nearby, and they tell us that they are dealing with a lot of the same things we used to deal with," Buckley said. "I feel like if every library had a union, they wouldn't have all those problems." 



Members of AFSCME Local 3883 speak to the tollway board in July.

Carrying a petition to the tollway director asking her to correct the "injustice that is occurring on [her] watch", the four members of the committee collected signatures at each location where customer-service representatives work.

"We've stayed loyal to the tollway, only to get this slap in the face," read the petition, which was ultimately signed by almost every customer-service representative at the tollway. "A \$20 an hour wage would be a substantial raise for 88% of us. It's only right that your experienced staff make at least what you think a new hire is worth."

Overwhelmingly ratified by those voting, the agreement includes 21.25% in across-the-board pay increases. They also

"I'm proud of how our committee was able to get creative with how we backed up our proposals with action," Musich said. "The result is the best contract that we've gotten since I've been here."

St. Charles Public Library workers win first contract

FOR THE 54 AFSCME MEMBERS at the St. Charles Public Library, their first contract ticks all the boxes—and then some.

Brandon Buckley, an early activist for the union

SHORT REPORTS



Members of SAG-AFTRA on strike in New York this summer.

Union approval continues to climb

MORE AMERICANS TODAY believe that labor unions benefit society and want to see their influence strengthen over time, according to a new Gallup poll.

Gallup's annual poll on union popularity, which the organization releases around Labor Day every year, shows that two-thirds of respondents (67%) approve of labor unions. Support for unions in the United States has been rising for more than a decade, and 2023 is the fifth straight year that it has surpassed its long-term average of 62%, according to Gallup.

The poll shows one-third of Americans (34%) believe unions will become stronger in the future than they are now. That's a huge increase since 2018 – the last time this sentiment was measured – when only 19% said so.

"This year's Gallup poll confirms what we've known for a long time: Americans believe in the power of unions to strengthen our economy and improve the lives of working people. Not only has the overall favorability of unions remained high, but it is increasing across all demographics—especially among the younger generation that will lead the labor movement in the future," AFSCME President Lee Saunders said in a statement.

AFSCME members know the union difference firsthand, but now more workers, including those who don't belong to unions, believe unions have a positive influence on business and the economy, according to the poll. The results show that a record 61% of respondents say unions help rather than hurt the U.S. economy and 57% say unions mostly help the companies where workers are unionized.

This year has seen an impressive amount of worker activism. From Hollywood writers and actors to Starbucks baristas, Amazon drivers, UPS workers, automotive workers and more, union members are taking action, sometimes even going on strike, to make their voices heard and achieve fair contracts. Some 650,000 workers are on strike or were expected to strike this summer alone.

"We have continued to organize nonstop. Six thousand workers at museums, libraries, zoos and other cultural institutions have joined AFSCME since 2019," Saunders said. "In Colorado, AFSCME members have been working to organize more than 36,000 county workers who won collective bargaining rights last year. In New Orleans, municipal employees represented by AFSCME won the freedom to negotiate a few months ago."

Now, Congress must eliminate barriers to organizing.

Lawmakers must approve the Richard Trumka Protecting the Right to Organize Act (PRO Act), which would make it easier for private sector workers to form unions, and the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act, which would establish a minimum nationwide standard of collective bargaining rights that all states must provide public service workers.

Gallup isn't the only organization reporting a steady rise in union popularity. The AFL-CIO also released a recent survey that shows overwhelming public support for unions

—across party lines and particularly among young people.

Writers' and actors' strike continues

MEMBER OF THE WRITERS' Guild of America and the Screen Actors' Guild have been on strike for several months now, and studio bosses have shown no indication that they are willing to back down from their radical proposals around artificial intelligence.

On Labor Day, SAG-AFTRA National Executive Director Duncan Ireland-Crabtree wrote an open letter to their members, saying that union negotiators stand ready to negotiate once again, so long as the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, the group that represents the studio bosses, is "ready to bargain in good faith."

"Your tenacity and your indomitable spirit have captivated the public and created a groundswell of support from individuals all across the political spectrum," Ireland-Crabtree wrote. "Labor actions have a long and proud tradition, and no significant gains have ever come without a struggle."

Movie and television writers in the Writers Guild of America are, like their colleagues in the actors' union, determined to stay out on strike until they get the contract they deserve.

Accusing the AMPTP of trying to get the writers to "cave", the WGA negotiating committee is now calling for studios to negotiate individual deals with the union separately from streamers due to disparities between business models and interests, as well as historical differences and relationships.

Both unions are committed in their resolve to doing whatever it takes to secure the future of their profession and to stand against the corporate greed that is threatening to drain the film and television industry of its working-class talent. ✍️



A new poll shows that a majority of Americans approve of labor unions and wish they had more influence.

RETIREE NOTES

New state contract benefits SERS, SURS retirees

RETIRED STATE AND UNIVERSITY employees will benefit from several health care provisions in the new AFSCME master contract with the State of Illinois.

That's due to the long-standing practice that the terms and conditions of state retiree health care coverage administered by the Illinois Department of Central Management Services are negotiated by AFSCME.

In these negotiations, the AFSCME Bargaining Committee was comprised of more than 200 rank-and-file members elected by their coworkers. Maintaining high-quality, affordable health care is always one of our union's core goals, and the committee was very aware of its responsibility to retirees.

Thanks to their unwavering determination, the health care cost increases in this agreement for the State Employee Group Insurance Program are among the lowest ever.

For retirees under age 65 who are not yet eligible to participate in the Medicare Advantage program (MAPD), in the second year of the agreement (starting July 1, 2024) there will be a very modest premium increase of \$6 per month for dependent coverage. Dependent coverage will increase by \$4 per month in years 3 and 4.



AFSCME Retirees and community allies meet with Rep. Brad Schneider (center) to urge him to continue the fight to lower Medicare drug costs.

Out-of-pocket increases are limited, targeted and consistent with health care trends. Most importantly, there will be no increase in the annual out-of-pocket maximum—the total amount any participant could be required to pay for covered health care services in any one year—for the entire term of the agreement.

For retirees covered by the Aetna Medicare Advantage PPO, the MAPD Plan, **there will be no retiree health care cost increases—either in premiums or out-of-pocket costs** (such as co-pays and deductibles)—for the entire four-year term of the contract.

In Illinois, retired and active AFSCME members have stood arm-in-arm, working together to protect our common interests and advance

our common goals. We have been successful in fighting off attacks on our pensions, on Social Security, on Medicare, and on our health insurance. The vital work will continue in the years ahead.

Retirees meet with U.S. Rep. Schneider on Rx costs

AFSCME RETIREES JOINED representatives from Citizen Action/Illinois and the Illinois Alliance for Retired Americans in July to meet with Congressman Brad Schneider (D-10). They thanked him for supporting the Inflation Reduction Act and urged him to help defend

its provisions to lower Medicare prescription drug costs from attacks by big pharmaceutical companies.

Signed into law a year ago by President Biden, the Inflation Reduction Act allows the federal government to negotiate prices for some of the drugs that cost Medicare the most—an approach long fought for by AFSCME and other advocates. But Big Pharma is now suing to try to block implementation of the Medicare drug price negotiations.

“The drug companies are making profits hand over fist, every single year,” said John Tilden, president of AFSCME sub-chapter 66 in Lake and McHenry counties. “We need our lawmakers to stand up for fairness. We’re not trying to drive pharmaceutical

companies out of business, but rather create a more level playing field so seniors can afford the medications we need.”

According to the Georgetown University Health Policy Institute, American adults pay out-of-pocket for almost half of their prescription expenses. Under the status quo, that ratio gets worse the older you get: Persons age 65 to 79 pay 56% of drug costs out-of-pocket; those age 80 and older pay 67%. Allowing Medicare to negotiate lower prices gives it the same power the VA already has to bring prices down.

“Seniors have immense voting power,” Tilden said. “We can and must continuously communicate with our elected officials, especially on programs as vital to our lives as Medicare and Social Security.”



BEATING THE HEAT

The tail end of summer has brought with it dangerously hot weather. Staying cool is a matter of life and death, especially for those over 65. Fortunately, many homes in our area have air conditioning, which means the fallout for the majority of people is the subsequent high cost of energy bills. If you've had exorbitant energy bills of late, you should be aware of these options.

💰 **The Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).** Administered by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, LIHEAP is designed to help income-eligible households pay for winter energy service. Call the LIHEAP hotline at 877-411-9276 or contact your Local Administering Agency or Community Action Agency (find out which agency serves you at the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity website).

💰 **ComEd Smart Assistance Manager (SAM).** ComEd's resource of programs providing financial assistance on electric bills for qualified customers.

💰 **Warm Neighbors Cool Friends.** This Ameren program provides year-round energy bill payment assistance and home weatherization to make harsh winters and hot summers bearable. Eligible households can receive up to \$350 to help pay for energy costs (\$350 during the heating season and \$200 during the cooling season.)

💰 **Ameren Payment Assistance.** Ameren Illinois offers several forms of financial assistance, including short-term, one-time payment extensions and fixed monthly payment agreements to settle past balances.



Lorena Oviedo

AFSCME Local 505

CLINICAL THERAPIST III, CHICAGO DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

What do you do as a clinical therapist?

Every day is very different. Generally, I provide individual therapy for people who have a diagnosis of mental illness. Or it could be that they're going through a transition in their life that they

What made you want to do this kind of work?

Growing up in Pilsen, I lost a lot of friends to gun violence. Part of me wanted to know if there was an intervention for them. How could things be different if they had someone to talk to?

“I feel like I’m doing the work that I am meant to do. For me, I’ve always had a position where I was of service to others.”

need help managing. I also provide family therapy; I see both youth and adults in my caseload in the community.

A lot of people have this idea that we only serve people with severe mental illnesses. But in community health, it's not just that. Mental health is on a spectrum.

I also know how deep the need is for Spanish-speaking folks. I'm one of five Spanish-speaking clinicians in the Chicago Department of Public Health, so my whole caseload is Spanish-only. I'm a first-generation immigrant; I came to this country when I was 2 years old, and translating was a big part of growing up for

me. I helped people navigate systems they were unfamiliar with.

Hispanic culture will say it's normal to have feelings of desperation or being intensely worried. But people are becoming aware of how much those feelings disrupt their functioning. I think being able to help them identify the way the behaviors are not helping them meet their physical, mental or emotional needs helps them begin to establish self-advocacy.

How can clinical care providers like you help improve upon the services your agencies offer?

I think the biggest thing we can do as clinicians is to elevate our clients' voices. We could do that by creating programming that best supports what is happening in their communities. In our role, we're able to see patients who are rooted in creating these little communities. I feel like we really get good feedback from our clients

inadvertently because they're sharing important things from our treatment.

For all the current mental health staff, our goal is to protect the clinics that are in service now so we can be a model for expansion of future clinics. If we solidify our roots in the clinics now, we can be such a big resource for mental health in the city of Chicago.

Are you active in your union?

Yes, I became a steward last year. For me, it was about becoming more of a formal resource for the mental health department here. I saw a lot of folks have questions about how our job can be more effective. That's the role I've taken on as a steward. I'm all about service. I wanted to be that for our colleagues as well. I knew that they had needs they weren't communicating.

How do you find pride in your work?

I have patients who lost children to things outside of their control. Helping people figure out what that grief looks like and what it really is because it's so different for everyone—that service being available to everyone is so important to me.

I feel like I'm doing the work that I am meant to do. For me, I've always had a position where I was of service to others. I know that I can't fill all the gaps. There are too many cracks that people can fall through. I am a droplet in the ocean that will make the wave. I love the work that I'm doing. I think it's work that is needed and as long as I'm needed, I will continue to do it. 🌊