

This is a letter describing one member's experience and thoughts as an AFSCME/Council 2 member.

What AFSCME Has Meant to Me

Over the past several years, as I have become an increasingly active member of my local, I have come to appreciate the role that unions have played shaping our history over the previous century. This awareness struck me with the greatest impact during the International Convention in Philadelphia last summer. As I sat with the other delegates, I looked around me, looked at the faces of the attendees and came fully to realize how AFSCME and other unions have worked and struggled and sacrificed to make our present lives possible.

Philadelphia, steeped in history as the birthplace of the nation, was a fitting setting to reflect on organized labor's accomplishments. The industrial revolution that drew the multitudes to America's cities created intolerable conditions for America's working families. The lives of the majority of citizens were drastically different from those we "enjoy" today. There were no workplace safety protections, no job security, no long-term disability insurance, and no pension or health-care plans. To express a grievance against an employer would quickly result in lack of employment. Workers had no weekends off, no holidays, and no overtime pay for the fourteen-hour days they often worked. Each of these things we take for granted was a hard-fought battle, won by individuals realizing that by joining forces as a union, workers gain a voice.

For me, AFSCME represents that tradition of uniting for a common cause, building a force to be reckoned with by standing together. As we face an uncertain future, my commitment to My union grows stronger, because I realize that it is only through the union that any of us will have a voice in the workplace. Alone, I am expendable. I can be replaced on management's whim. My salary may be lowered or benefits discontinued without warning. I may be subject to unfair treatment, with rules arbitrarily put in place. My protests of unsafe conditions may go unheeded.

As a member of AFSCME, I have the power of my union behind me. I have a voice in the workplace and recourse to grievances. I am protected from unsafe working conditions and injustice on the job. As a part of AFSCME, I can help shape the future for my fellow union members and myself.

For women and minorities, AFSCME represents equality. Through our union, women and minorities gain power in the workplace that they may lack without the organizing force of our labor union. These individuals are often under-represented within the management of our workplaces. It stands to reason that some of our unique needs and concerns would not be addressed without the support of a strong union behind us, a union in which we are well represented.

Unfortunately, many of us within AFSCME have yet to realize how formidable unity is. As Joseph Ettor of the IWW once said, "if the workers of the world want to win, all they have to do is recognize their own solidarity. They have nothing to do but fold their arms and the world will stop." As union members, we must remember that management does not need us as individuals, but they need us collectively. Each time we stand against wrongs to our union brothers and sisters we grow stronger as a union. This strength benefits us all.

Through AFSCME, we have the power to shape our future.

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