



AFSCME Facts

The Truth About Collective Bargaining for Public Service Workers

Deep and serious budget problems brought on by the Great Recession have prompted some politicians to vow to weaken, or even completely strip state and local public service workers of their right to bargain for fair wages and decent benefits. They claim collective bargaining ties their hands. They claim it harms the economy. They claim it is the cause of their budget problems. They're wrong on all counts. It's time to stop the lies.

Collective bargaining not only benefits workers who belong to a union, it benefits employers as well.

- Unions increase productivity, by 19 to 24 percent in manufacturing, 16 percent in hospitals and up to 38 percent in construction, and unions decrease turnover.
- Good labor-management relations enable employers to make the best use of their most valuable resources – the skills and expertise of their employees. Unions increase opportunities for worker training.
- Collective bargaining provides a forum where employers and employees can join together to tackle problems. It is a two-way street that does not require any employer – public or private – to agree to any terms they cannot live with.

Collective bargaining and economic well-being go hand-in-hand: Taxpayers are better off in states where public employees enjoy collective bargaining because workers who have more to spend help build a stronger economy.

- The income of residents of states that recognize the right of state employees to unionize is higher¹ than elsewhere.
- Eight of the top 10 states in terms of disposable income recognize the right of public employees to bargain collectively. Nine of the bottom 10 states in per capita income do not have public sector collective bargaining.
- Increasing the number of workers in unions by a modest amount could pump \$49 billion into the U.S. economy².

¹ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis

² Center for American Progress Action Fund, "Unions Are Good for Workers and the Economy in Every State," 2/18/09

The right to join a union and collective bargaining make sense in America, are fundamental to democracy and, for public employees, help ensure honest public services.

- Freedom of assembly is a fundamental part of our democratic tradition. The First Amendment in the Bill of Rights ensures for all Americans the “right of the people peaceably to assemble.”
- The public is best served by public employees whose first loyalty is to their job, not to a political party. In the public sector, collective bargaining insulates employees from politics and patronage.
- Bargaining brings consistency to personnel matters and provides fairness through mutually agreed upon contractual rights and obligations.
- Collective bargaining is a fundamental democratic right – one enjoyed by most private sector workers since the National Labor Relations Act was passed in 1935.

Public employees deserve the same right to discuss workplace issues with their employer that most private sector employees have.

- Virtually every public sector bargaining law acknowledges that some public safety functions cannot be interrupted and includes provisions to accommodate those, so it is unreasonable to deny collective bargaining rights to public employees based on the importance of the public services they provide.
- Some politicians and pundits today question whether people who work for government should have the right to join a union at all. Civic leaders in Memphis, Tenn., in 1968 tried to deny city sanitation workers that right. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his life supporting their cause. That question has long been settled.
- Two-thirds of state and local employees have similar rights under various state laws and local ordinances. State employees in 31 states, plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, have collective bargaining rights.

AFSCME is proud of its history of working in partnership with public employers to improve the quality of life of its members and the communities they serve.

- During the current recession, AFSCME members across the country have offered up money-saving ideas to balance budgets. In many cases members have agreed to contract concessions to help public employers weather the current storm, while working to save jobs and prevent layoffs which would further harm our fragile economy.

The importance of workers’ rights to freedom of association, to organize and to bargain collectively with their employers and to be treated with dignity and respect has been recognized internationally for years.

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, unanimously adopted by the United Nations in 1948, states that “everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions.”
- The United Nations Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratified by the United States in 1992, affirms the right to freedom of association, including the right to form and join unions.
- Organized religions, including the National Council of Churches, representing 35 Anglican, Orthodox, Protestant, historic African-American and Peace churches, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis, hold the right to form and join unions as fundamental to their faiths.