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Sean P. McLeod

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An AFSCME Local Transforms Local Politics

Abstract

[Excerpt] In the late 1980s, AFSCME Local 2703, in Merced, California, found itself in a position familiar to many union members at that time: fighting hard to keep pay and benefits from being slashed. The realization that these confrontations could occur at every contract led local members to look for ways to make local government more responsive to the working men and women of the community. Through commitment and determination — and two bitter strikes — Local 2703 held its own against a local government determined to render it powerless. Through community education and coalition, the local to (sic) achieved its first small victories.

The lessons the local members learned enabled them to build an effective and influential political action committee that reaches beyond the limits of their own union contracts to pursue political change, furthers community awareness and promote coalitions across racial, ethnic, and economic barriers. Their continuing commitment to the notion that working men and women are brothers and sisters, who deserve the respect of their peers and their government leaders, has them poised to be a visible influence in the politics of Merced County.

Keywords

AFCSME, local politics, Merced, California, community, political action



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An AFCSME Local Transforms Local Politics

■ *Sean P. McLeod*

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■ *Sean P. McLeod is a member of AFSCME Local 2703 PAC and a freelance writer in Merced, California.*

MERCED COUNTY BLUES

Merced, the county seat, is a growing city with a population between 50,000 and 60,000. A beautiful Victorian courthouse, built by the early residents in the 1800's, still stands in a lovely central park. Now a museum, it regularly offers exhibits on the agricultural and pioneer past of this county and city. Located in California's Central Valley, Merced is one of the foremost agricultural areas in the nation. Five minutes out of town in any direction are fields of tomatoes, grain, or alfalfa, and orchards of almonds, peaches, figs, or walnuts. However, Merced's north side is expanding furiously, with tract homes quickly replacing fields where cows grazed a few years ago. The city is one of three finalists to be the site for the next state university campus.

Some of the smaller cities in the county, traditionally small towns centered around one agricultural enterprise, are also bustling. Feeding this growth is a clamor of developers, who along with the traditionally powerful agricultural interests, have acquired a great deal of clout as they build large tracts of formerly prime agricultural land into housing, industrial parks, malls, and shopping centers.

But the county has one of the state's highest unemployment and teen-pregnancy rates. California's famous fiscal woes place a great burden on its counties, which are responsible for financing the court system, welfare, public hospitals, and other social safety net services, not to mention paying county workers. Although county employees have been well represented by AFSCME for a number of years, there is a history of weak union membership and activity, due to the presence of seasonal and migrant workers and the agricultural industry's traditional resistance to unions.

As the counties' pocketbooks strained through the 1980's, and the decade's anti-union sentiment remained high among politicians, local government leaders predictably blamed the county's own unionized workforce for their budgetary problems. Nevertheless, AFSCME Local 2703, which represents most of those county employees, was a bit surprised at how hard the county government came after them as contract renewal negotiations began in 1987. The reaction of the union members, and the events in Merced County politics over the ensuing seven years, may offer some help—to others in similar situations.

Merced County is governed by the Board of Supervisors, which has been until recently a prime example of the "good old boy" system, even though the supervisors weren't always old, or even boys. The large, old agricultural families and companies, the Chamber of Commerce, and developers seemed to have a perpetual lock on the five Board seats.

If you haven't managed to forget the '80s, remember that they were a time of skyrocketing land values, promises to run government "like any other business," and old-fashioned union-busting. This created the perfect atmosphere for employers to stand tough against unions, secure in the knowledge that public opinion was on their side, and that they could stall, outwait, and even replace union workers with little effective resistance.

In 1987, relations between the Merced County Board of Supervisors and Local 2703 were strained. In fact, the Board seemed to have no respect or concern for any of the county employees, whether members of AFSCME, Teamsters, or other independent unions that represented many clerical workers. The Board took a hardball position in contract negotiations, regularly spending county funds on outside professional negotiators. It seemed to have made a political decision to crush the union.

In May, 1987, the Board offered a contract calling for a pay cut and increased employee contributions for reduced health care coverage. Talks quickly stalemated, and the workers soon found themselves where they did not want to be: on strike. After 17 days, the workers achieved a victory of sorts. Their wages and health care benefits were preserved.

SEEKING LABOR'S CANDIDATES

The bitter strike had a large impact on the politics of the town and the network of politicians running it. Union members felt betrayed and were particularly bitter towards one county supervisor. She had come to Local 2703 for its endorsement in prior elections, and each time had received it. She had claimed to be on the side of the workers, but never before had she been called upon to prove it. During several four-year terms as supervisor, she had built a powerful local political base, wielded considerable clout, and was beginning to make a slight stir in political circles beyond Merced County. When the contract issue came up, however, she opposed the union's demands, and her considerable pull created the stalemate leading to the strike. Union members, who had counted on her for even-handed, fair support, were stunned and offended by her stance. Several of the members active in the strike decided to find a pro-labor candidate to run against her in the election that November.

Rae Hughes, a union steward and a central-supply technician at Merced Community Medical Center (MCMC), offered to throw her hat in the ring, and was supported by union workers who had become politicized by the strike. Rae asked another active union member, Steve Contreras (now the local's president), to manage her campaign. The

campaign committee consisted of 10 to 15 friends, mostly fellow county employees and AFSCME members. Nobody, from the candidate on down, had any political experience. Despite their passion and commitment, they were no match for the campaign apparatus of the incumbent. “We got our butts kicked,” recalls Contreras, although Hughes won 20% of the vote, a respectable showing for a novice campaign. “We just didn’t know how to run a campaign. Precinct walking, phone banking, getting out the vote, absentee ballots, you name it—and we knew little or nothing about it.”

The union brothers and sisters learned two key lessons. First, even at the county level, winning campaigns cannot operate through bake sales and xeroxed leaflets stuck under windshield wipers. Passion and commitment can influence voters, but you have to get the voters to hear you. Second, the interests of the union must be linked to the interests of the community as a whole, so voters feel they are supporting more than “a union special interest.” The union can mobilize its membership around issues of contracts, wages, and working conditions. But in order to influence elections, it must also be willing to help its friends and the community as a whole.

“All of us who were spurred into action by the ‘87 strike were concerned citizens,” says Denise Murphy, who has served on the local’s executive board and contract negotiation team and is currently a member of its political action committee. “We were concerned about our community, about social issues. And the negotiations and strike in ‘87 made us much more involved in union affairs. I think we all saw a connection between the two in the abstract. We just didn’t realize at the time the importance of emphasizing the connection for purposes of political effectiveness.”

Without that connection, the local’s membership didn’t really know how to make the most of their political energies. They tried to stay active in politics, but didn’t have the organizational skill to mount any large-scale campaigns. However, they kept plugging away—and did have some successes. When two Merced supermarkets were embroiled in union certification elections, the local’s members joined the grocery workers on their picket lines. The members were also successful in getting the local’s business agent, Gene Stamm, elected as a delegate to the 1988 Democratic national convention. And they continued printing the newsletter they had started during the strike, to keep the membership informed.



PAC in action—sending our newsletter to members.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS: THE REWARDS

Although not a conscious strategy, the local's consistent involvement in community affairs and support of other workers' groups had a positive effect. The community and its leaders began to see the local as an influential, pro-worker organization, not a single-issue, special-interest group.

In 1989, the MCMC workers went on strike over the issue of staffing, the first time a public hospital in California was hit by a strike. The hospital staff felt it had no choice because the Board of Supervisors, as a means of controlling costs, had begun operating the hospital with nurse-to-patient ratios that the nurses felt were unsafe. Contract talks stalled. The Board tried to paint the union as being greedy in tough times at the expense of the county's fiscal health. This time, however, the union enjoyed strong community support because of its improved public image. As in 1987, the union prevailed.

The union was happy with the results of the strike, but unhappy that it had been necessary. The union's leadership knew the Board would continue to play hardball unless the union could show strength. They decided it was time to learn how to get pro-union candidates elected to the Board. If they wanted to be a force in city and county politics, they had to become involved and make it known that their backing was important and influential.

In 1991, Local 2703 took several steps that would strengthen it polit-

ically. Several representatives were sent to San Francisco for training sessions in political activism offered by AFSCME. In June 1991, two Merced City Council candidates who had expressed pro-union sentiments asked for the endorsement of the local. This presented a big decision to the local. If it endorsed candidates who lost, the local would be back where it was in 1987, when no one took its members seriously as workers, voters, or a political force.

The local decided to endorse both candidates and to be actively involved in the campaigns to make sure the candidates won. It began an internal campaign, sending letters to the members announcing the union's endorsement.

The local's members turned out in high numbers, helping the two candidates win and giving another boost to the local's confidence and determination to become even better at running political campaigns. The core of political activists, encouraged by the success of the recent campaigns, grew.

In the fall of 1991, the local sent several members to political action training seminars sponsored by AFSCME Council 57, which covers central California. Again, the members were energized and enthused by meeting with other union activists from outside the county and by the focused training in political activism they received. They returned home ready to get to work.

Soon after the seminars, the local's executive board formed its own PAC. At the first PAC meeting, Don Peery, who attended the training seminars, was elected PAC chairperson. The committee set about implementing what had been learned at the seminars, organizing the PAC and making plans for their future.

The local faced a big test in 1992, when the county's supervisorial districts were redrawn. The district of Anne Klinger, the union's nemesis from the strike years, was split into two. Gloria Keene, a county employee, long-time AFSCME member, and a Merced City Council member, decided to run for the post. The union saw its chance and threw its support behind Keene. It organized fundraisers, made signs, distributed literature, and urged the local's members to get out the vote for Gloria. The PAC and the local contributed money to her campaign.

GETTING EXPERT HELP

Three candidates were in the race, including Keene, who was an underdog. The traditional, nonunion, pro-business political establishment of the county was solidly behind one of her opponents. Five weeks before the November election, union members realized that they were



Gloria Cortez Keene, AFSCME Sister Local 2703 and Merced County Board of Supervisors, District 1.

being outspent by the opposition and lacked the skills and experience in campaigning to overcome that obstacle. They turned to the upper echelons of AFSCME for seasoned, professional help. Gene Stamm, the business agent, contacted the state AFSCME office, explained the local's situation, and requested help. In response, AFSCME sent Judy Steinke.

Once Judy arrived, the campaign took on a professional tone. She organized phone banks, established committees, and taught the PAC how to obtain important voter lists and information. At the same time, Keene asked Robin Adams, a Merced resident with experience in political action, to come aboard as her campaign manager. Working together, Adams, who was not affiliated with the union, handled Gloria's day-to-day campaign while Steinke and the PAC worked the phones, walked the neighborhoods, and reached out to every individual and community organization that might lend them a hand. With only five weeks to go, they worked feverishly to make up ground.

AFSCME responded quickly and effectively. As a result, Keene came in second, but garnered enough votes to deny victory to her main opponent and force a runoff in December, 1992. The union campaign was running smoothly, and the strong finish had the members energized and in high gear. They went to work with a vengeance. Gloria was the underdog again, but by now many community leaders sensed a winner and lent their support. More nonunion volunteers came into the fold. The well-run campaign gave the message that this was the candidate with the intelligence and expertise to handle the responsibility of county government.

Keene won the runoff. It was a great moment for everyone at the local. There were plenty of smiles on election night as the votes came in. A coalition had been formed between the union and community groups. The only disappointment was the race for another seat on the

Board of Supervisors. The PAC had endorsed and campaigned for Dorothy Bizzini against an entrenched and well-financed incumbent. Bizzini was originally declared the winner, but some unopened absentee ballots found in a dumpster by the opposing candidate were counted; they swung the election to Bizzini's foe.

Shortly after the election, an event occurred in Merced that gave the local the chance to reach out to the community. A group of citizens, led by local African-American groups and community leaders, was pressing

to rename one of the main streets in Merced in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The issue began to cause a stir in Merced. Against considerable opposition, without hesitation the local threw its support behind the name change. They contributed funds to the campaign and marched at rallies. They appeared at meetings to let the African-American community know of the union's respect for Dr. King and of its support for the campaign. Other labor and community organizations also came aboard, and Martin Luther King Jr. Way now runs proudly through Merced.

The Local's PAC was now firmly established. One final step would seal its reputation as a political force. Cynthia Garcia was running for the Merced City Council, with the active backing of the local firefighters' union. Since she had helped out in the Keene campaign, Garcia asked Local 2703 to endorse her and help her campaign. The PAC did both. The activists' political skills showed an amazing improvement. Everything they had learned during the last several campaigns they now got to teach to others. The firefighters were in the position that Local 2703 was in several years earlier: plenty of energy and enthusiasm, but little knowledge of the most effective campaign techniques. The local's PAC set up phone banks for Garcia, mapped out precinct-walking campaigns, established Get Out The Vote committees, offered rides to the polls, and used every other technique to ensure a high voter turnout.



Cynthia Garcia, AFSCME Sister Local 2703 and member, Merced City Council.

Cynthia won, and she has a bright future ahead of her. In addition, the PAC had endorsed candidates for mayor and another council seat, both of whom won.

LASTING CHANGES

What have these events done for the local and its PAC? The PAC has proven to be a highly effective organization that commands the respect of politicians, community leaders, business leaders, and candidates—even those on the other side of the political divide. Now candidates for every election in the county ask for the support of Local 2703's PAC, which invites them for interviews at which they present their reasons why the local should support them.

Focus has been a key to the local's success. "We try to make an informed and calculated choice about where to put our resources," says Denise Murphy. "Which race will have the greatest potential to influence matters important to our membership? On the other hand, which race features a candidate that the members can put their support behind? They're not always the same. And you have to focus your resources on what you decide is most important. You can't spread yourself around to too many candidates or you lose effectiveness. In the last election, when we were out walking precincts we were glad to remind voters of the other candidates we supported, from mayor to President. But we were out there for Cynthia. We organized ourselves around what it would take to win that particular race."

There are other benefits to engaging in political action. And it all comes back to the members. "The camaraderie—you could feel it in the room," says Steve Contreras. "Those nights we worked so long and hard, you could just feel the energy and the commitment in the room. That has to make your union better. That will make anything better." ■