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## Creating A Monster: AFSCME's Ready-to-Fight in Illinois

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## Creating A Monster: AFSCME's Ready-to-Fight in Illinois

### Abstract

[Excerpt] Frequent media images of hundreds of county workers marching in front of public buildings in Rockford, Illinois, chanting confrontational slogans, rocked an otherwise sedate community. In an area where trade unionism derives its identity from the now small manufacturing sector, TV audiences were mesmerized by the sight of nursing home workers, court clerks, mechanics, jail guards, clericals, probation officers and tradesmen standing together, redefining the nature of unionism in Winnebago County.

### Keywords

AFSCME, unionism, strike, decertification, organizing, negotiation, labor dispute



# Creating A Monster

## AFSCME's Ready-to-Fight in Illinois

■ *Abel Halpern*

Frequent media images of hundreds of county workers marching in front of public buildings in Rockford, Illinois, chanting confrontational slogans, rocked an otherwise sedate community. In an area where trade unionism derives its identity from the now small manufacturing sector, TV audiences were mesmerized by the sight of nursing home workers, court clerks, mechanics, jail guards, clericals, probation officers and tradesmen standing together, redefining the nature of unionism in Winnebago County.

In October of 1990, Winnebago County AFSCME Local 473 celebrated an unprecedented contract victory. The new agreement included a 23% wage-and-benefit increase in the first year. Workers received wage increases from 10% to 25%, a 60% reduction in the cost of dependent health coverage, longevity bonuses, parking allowances, uniform allowances, shift and weekend differentials, the elimination of a two-tiered benefits system, and a series of major language improvements, including the public sector equivalent of a union shop. Local 473's victory, however, lies less in their awesome monetary and contractual gains than

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in the program that led to the contract and the new kind of unionism that emerged.

Seven months earlier, decertification and disintegration threatened this very same local. It had been plagued by the typical internal problems faced by unions in America. The employer, the Winnebago County Board, retained an infamous Chicago-based law firm to exploit every opportunity to discredit and weaken the local. The workers themselves had internalized a "what is the union going to do for me" mentality. Workers thought of the union as a third party that had reneged on a "promise" to make their work lives more satisfying and lucrative. They believed that the union staff person "servicing" their 550-person bargaining unit bore the primary responsibility for every element of the union's operation.

Through seven months of internal organizing and highly atypical contract negotiations, workers gradually abandoned these conceptions of unionism and internalized a new understanding of their individual duty to take responsibility for and invest themselves in the union. "Organizing" was now understood not as a peripheral activity to maintain dues collection, but rather as the central activity that guided every action, internal and external, of the union. Workers learned that contract negotiations did not take place only in a bargaining session involving a few officers, but also in the workplace, in the streets and in the community, involving as many people as possible.

### **Pledging to Fight**

As 1990 began, the leadership of Illinois AFSCME Council 31, the state organization that oversees the local, was alarmed at Local 473's inability to reverse its decline, especially as its contract expired at the end of September. The state leadership knew that traditional methods would not work with this troubled local, and decided to make a major investment in revitalizing the Winnebago County organization.

In March 1990 Council 31 sent a full-time organizer along with the union staff representative to put together a plan to rebuild Local 473 and to win a new collective bargaining agreement from an extremely hostile employer.

The five-year-old bargaining unit represented a diverse group including nursing home workers, highway employees, clericals, probation officers, correctional and juvenile detention officers, and court employees. Membership was at 20% and shrinking. Out of a bargaining unit of more than 500, only about 20 people had any substantive connection with the union. The few shop stewards

found themselves isolated and ineffective. The leadership of the local had little hope and found themselves at a loss as to how to keep the union from withering away.

For the majority of the work force the union did not exist. But a substantial minority were vocally anti-union and initiated a decertification effort which garnered much interest. The county government, recognizing the feebleness of the union, took every chance it had to discredit the local by either denying the most simple grievance or just ignoring the union altogether. The infamous anti-union law firm Seyfarth, Shaw, Fairweather & Geraldson directed the county's efforts.

The union's rank-and-file elected leadership was accustomed to taking half measures, ignoring or not understanding the endemic problems of the organization. Many were reluctant to embark on a program that would endanger the "relationships" they had with managers and what they saw as their status as union leaders. The primary challenge was to get this group to accept the chilling reality that their union was all but gone.

To save the local a radical program had to be implemented, taking substantial risks and, in effect, "raising the stakes." The first step in this process was planning. There were seven months until the contract expired. In past contract organizing efforts, the emphasis was on "signing up members," but there appeared to be little correlation between high membership and actual strength if people are joining the union for the "wrong" reason—that is, joining the union as if it were a service organization that could produce an improved worklife and a bigger paycheck without the commitment and involvement of the individual worker. The program had to make people accept a personal responsibility for the union and to internalize the concept that this was in effect a battle with only two sides, management and worker. And, they had to be committed to a detailed plan for actually winning, not just surviving.

The theme of the drive was READY TO FIGHT—CONTRACT 90. In the first months of the campaign the goal was to "jump start" the union, creating momentum so the union could grow rapidly. In order to do this there had to be an effort to make sure that current members, and any new members, were in the union for the "right" reasons. Meetings were held with key individuals and groups throughout the county. People were presented with a step-by-step plan for winning. The emphasis at these meetings was that the central element of a victory was the participation of workers. The AFSCME staff kept repeating that they, as staff, could promise nothing. The degree to which people were willing

to sacrifice and fight would determine the outcome. The message was simple:

"You are the union. You get what you are strong enough to get. Right now you are weak, so your contract is weak. If you are happy with a lousy contract, do nothing. If you want a better life and career, you are the one who has to act. The ONLY way to do that is to join with your co-workers and stick together. The county has declared war on YOU. So you had better fight back. Fighting means not only bringing your body to meetings, it means going after your co-workers and getting them to join us. It means arguing. It means never giving up."

Every member had to sign a READY TO FIGHT pledge and no worker could join the union unless they also signed the pledge. Conversely, no nonmember could sign a pledge. The text of the pledge read as follows:

**Ready  
to  
FIGHT  
CONTRACT 90**

*An Open Pledge to  
My Co-Workers in Winnebago County*

I deserve a contract that includes major improvements in wages, health benefits and working conditions. I deserve the respect that I earn every day. Only by fighting will we, the workers of Winnebago County, win what is right. I am ready to do everything I can to win this battle. I pledge to my co-workers and to my union that I am ready to fight.

**AFSCME Local 473** \_\_\_\_\_

Signature

The pledge had a number of purposes. This new militant and aggressive message had to be spread fast. The stress was on employees talking to and signing up other employees. Training sessions prepared people for talking with their co-workers, and the pledge gave them something to bring to their co-workers that was fresh and different. By being very strict about the conditions for membership and pledge-signing, a new sense of seriousness and urgency emerged. Pledge-signers received a black and blue READY TO FIGHT button, which they were told they had to wear. People saw the pledge campaign not as a "gimmick," but as a real effort by the union to take on the County Board.

The pledge forced people to begin to commit to a new conception of what the union is. It also put management off guard. Workers wore READY TO FIGHT pins, and put pledge posters on their desks and stickers on their work vehicles. County managers became enraged as some departments were blanketed with READY TO FIGHT stickers, posters and pledges.

In departments where there was negligible union presence, the organizers held lunches or simply hung around employee lunch and break areas. These numerous meetings would start as "informational" sessions, but would end with each worker being asked individually, in front of everyone else, to commit to the program. The organizer demanded that each individual decide "which side they were on" right then and there. This was complemented by equally straightforward and aggressive mailings to those groups and individuals who would not be reached in the first sweeps of one-on-one organizing.

By April, membership had doubled and a new, almost manic, mood had been created. Unprecedented numbers of workers began to turn out for meetings, as an extensive union organizing network began to emerge. The union was a major topic of conversation at every workplace in the county. Some anti-union people became increasingly belligerent as employees repeatedly approached them with pledges and invitations to lunches and meetings. But many anti-union workers decided to join the union. In a number of cases, entire groups of workers joined together. All the Adult Probation Officers and all the Building Inspectors, groups that had been anti-union, joined as groups and became central players in the contract fight.

### **The Monster Bargaining Committee**

The first stage was an overwhelming success. It succeeded because the union led by example, was aggressive and well orga-



nized, and had a plan for winning. The union was not negative, nor were there "debates" about why the local had a substandard contract. The focus was on the future, not the past.

But the focus on the future could not overcome lingering problems of trust, a conviction among many workers that in the past they were "sold out" by "back room deals." While many said they understood that the substandard wages and benefits came from the fact that the union was never very strong, not from anyone "selling them out," even the best had doubts. Words could not erase the lingering sentiments that were holding people back.

There had to be a way to get people fully invested in the contract fight. If people were only half-committed, they would find excuses to withdraw from the campaign as soon as it got hard. If members felt excluded from the bargaining process, they could not be expected to be active in supporting the union's demands. Traditional negotiations, conducted either by a small committee of representatives or by elected officers, would have played into the lingering fear of a "back room deal." The solution was to make the bargaining committee and organizing committee one and the same.

Sometimes called "monster bargaining committees," taking large groups of members to the bargaining table was not a foreign concept in Illinois AFSCME. The state workers' contract, for example, is bargained in the presence and with the active involvement of more than 200 bargaining representatives from various units around the state. Local 473 decided to recruit a volunteer bargaining committee of as many members as were willing to serve.

Though voluntary, the committee was open only to those who met certain basic criteria. Each committee member had to commit to seeing the process through to the end. By now it was early May, and this meant as many as two meetings a week through the fall. A concern was that bargaining would become a major activity that would remove the emphasis from organizing and talking with co-workers. To stress the importance of bringing negotiations back to the workplace, every prospective committee member had to have an official committee petition signed by four union members. Since the purpose was to make sure committee members were talking to people and not to limit the size, individuals were allowed to sign as many petitions as they liked.

More than 100 members, approximately one fifth of the unit, eventually made the commitment to join the committee. The message to the workers was that they were the only ones who had a right to decide their future, so if they cared, they needed to be on the committee or in constant touch with someone who was.

Word spread through the county about the big committee. County government officials told workers that there would be no negotiations in a "zoo" with so many people present. AFSCME staff pushed the committee not to buckle under. After all the incredible momentum around the idea of workers deciding their own futures every step of the way, to back down would be defeat. At the first session in June, the county's anti-union lawyers handed the union ground rules that included a limit on the size of our committee and restrictions on our communications with the media and the general public. With 98 workers present, the union informed the county that there would be no negotiations on the size of the committee and no agreement to any ground rules that substantively impaired the union's ability to go to the media.

The county was visibly upset with this forceful demonstration. Winning the fight over committee size and media access solidified committee members' commitment. They saw first-hand the arrogant million-dollar lawyers and the callous disrespect shown towards workers. They also saw that the plan for winning was real, that the union could stand fast and win. Workers were now fully invested in the fight.

Committee members said they understood that no real movement would occur until the very end, but it took a tremendous effort to keep people on the program of working with their co-workers, keeping them from getting frustrated and disgusted. People were instructed to bring the negotiations back to the worksites. After each bargaining session, we decided on a message that should be spread through the workplace.

## **The Community Campaign**

By mid-summer the structures were in place, and the union was a solid majority and growing. The focus had to shift to the sharpening of a plan that would actually win a good contract. The workers had to show the county through job actions, rallies and other activities that they could strike. These demonstrations of strength had to come well before the deadline. In addition, there had to be a way to reach out to the community and media so that by the contract deadline the union could create a sense of crisis in this otherwise quiet area. As long as the issues were presented by the workers themselves as issues of right and wrong, justice and injustice, combined with fear of a tumultuous labor dispute, the union could garner media attention and public support.

The union did not have the resources to send workers out to the community, as the organizing tasks were so great. Instead the

program relied heavily on direct mail, where three mailing lists proved particularly effective: a list of the families of residents of the county nursing home; a list of county government's vendors and creditors; and a list of every church and religious organization in the community.

A sophisticated press strategy was integral to success. People getting a "raw deal" was not a "story," as countless cases of injustice and exploitation exist everywhere and are not deemed newsworthy. The stress was on developing interesting stories and "giving them" to the press.

The union set an early deadline for a settlement, a month before the actual deadline. The reasoning was that "we had started a month early, let's finish a month early." We made up buttons and 50 workers held a press conference where the slogan "FAIR AND DONE BY SEPTEMBER ONE" was unveiled. The union pledged to do whatever necessary to avoid a labor dispute, while providing the media information about impoverished county workers. Stories about county workers on Public Aid began to circulate in the press. This early start allowed the union to establish the terms of the debate, neutralizing the county's ability to use the "greedy workers" argument. TV and radio coverage resulted in an expectation of an early settlement. When September came and there was no agreement, declarations were made raising the fear of an all-out strike. For the community and the county, the plan had succeeded in creating an atmosphere of crisis well before the actual deadline.

Concurrently, worksite organizing committees began to form. Their job was to organize and direct departmental job actions. Job actions varied, but the purpose was to demonstrate unity. Highway department employees, which had gone from 26% to 99% union, refused to cross an informational picket line at a quarry, causing a major dispute with management which included threats of firings. Courthouse employees spontaneously had a sick-in that was front-page headline news.

Nursing Home employees and Correctional Officers each circulated a petition, which 90% of the employees signed, decrying short staffing at the jail and in the nursing home. A press event where corrections officers in uniform stood side by side with nursing home employees was compelling enough for TV and radio to make it a major story. A week later the correctional officers' union organizing committee had 99% of all CO's refusing overtime until they had a new contract. This also was a lead story on television and in the papers. These job actions, all organized by worker committees, showed the county, the media, and other



...AFSCME Local 473's Bargaining Committee.

workers that the union was serious and had the real capacity to plan and implement coordinated action.

By mid-September the fight was in its final weeks. The press strategy became very aggressive as the union cultivated relationships with reporters, giving them inside information and feeding them stories where workers were taking action. Newspapers, TV and radio regularly featured the union. Disc jockeys were discussing the plight of county workers on the air. With each successful job action and public demonstration, union members gained greater confidence in themselves and their union. The attention of the media and the growing public support reinforced their feelings of empowerment.

### **Organizing for the Final Push**

The bargaining committee, having maintained its enormous size, began to backslide in the organizing. People were giving up on the hard-core anti-union employees. The staff stressed the importance of "cracking every last nut," pushing every committee member to keep trying with even the most stubborn "hold outs." A group of workers began house visits to nonunion workers. While people were generally very nervous about house visits to hostile workers, these visits proved useful.

Ten days before the contract expired, the union conducted a strike vote. Voting was held at worksites to guarantee maximum participation. That evening at a rally of 250 county workers, half the bargaining unit, the union announced that 97% of the workers had voted to strike. This was broadcast live on the evening news of all three TV network affiliates.

That weekend the mailings began. First, the families of nursing home residents received a plea for help from the nursing home workers. The county went mad, threatening to arrest whoever copied the mailing list. Seeing such a reaction, a second mailing was sent under the organizer's name telling these families that the county paid people to look after stray dogs in kennels twice as much as they paid the people who cared for their parents and grandparents. This time the home and office phone numbers of the county board chairman were included.

The union sent out a 5,000-piece mailing to the county's vendors and creditors with a very simple message: they had better collect any monies owed them or demand payment at time of service until there was a settlement. Stories floated of companies refusing to take county checks and businessmen coming to the courthouse in person to demand that the county pay their bills. The church mailing produced multiple commitments for churches and food pantries to feed and clothe strikers and their families. All of this made the newspapers, feeding the fire of crisis.

Three days before the deadline the union held another rally, this time with community supporters. 400 people picketed the county board meeting, chanting furiously. Flanked by clergy and American flags, the marchers entered the meeting, made speeches and began chanting again, disrupting the county board session. The papers printed union pronouncements that "this would be like no strike this county has ever seen" and that the strike would be brought to the "homes, businesses and political activities of our enemies." These wild speeches, media images of hundreds of workers screaming and yelling, the community campaign and the mounting religious and public support all produced an atmosphere of genuine crisis.

Over the following week, through marathon negotiations, the union finally settled without a strike, the county caving in thoroughly. The union's monster bargaining committee lasted to the very end.

## **Conclusion**

Local 473's victory came from an aggressive, confrontational

and high profile campaign that won the imagination of the press and the support of the community. The workers' needs versus the county's greed was the topic of discussion for everyone who lived in Winnebago County. The pressure was too much for county officials, so they simply caved in.

The union's organizing program put the responsibility for fighting and winning a contract squarely on the workers' shoulders. Union staff and the resources of the state organization provided leadership and a plan for winning. But we made it clear that if workers were waiting for someone else to do it for them, they would win nothing. The program created a new terrain not only to facilitate mass involvement, but also to encourage new leadership to emerge.

The new faces that assumed the central positions in the READY TO FIGHT campaign are now experienced in the unionism of struggle, organization, discipline and participation. These individuals internalized the battle and took a deep personal responsibility for doing whatever was necessary to win. By the end of this fight, they understood that the strength of the union is based wholly on the commitment that co-workers have towards each other, not on the ability of overworked union staff to juggle a thousand grievances.

This experience shows that in a short time a disaffected and disorganized group can be transformed into a powerful force. The more difficult questions, however, lie in the future. Absent a crisis or a full-time organizer, how can this energy be sustained? The kind of resources AFSCME Illinois Council 31 provided to save this disintegrating local are not available on an ongoing basis. How can the new group of local activists institutionalize their leadership while the old leaders are even more committed to maintaining their positions now that the union is a dynamic and viable body? The "organizing model of unionism" relies on the belief that people should not shy away from injustice, that together with their co-workers they should stand up and fight. But how can union staff and rank-and-file leaders sustain mainstream membership involvement in the daunting and exhausting task of fighting the myriad of injustices management imposes during the life of a contract? How can leaders learn to pick their fights so they don't exhaust themselves and deplete their members' energies? These questions will not be answered by cerebral reflection. Unions will find solutions by embracing the fight, by devoting more resources to internal organizing, and by encouraging the development of new leaders and new kinds of leadership structures. ■