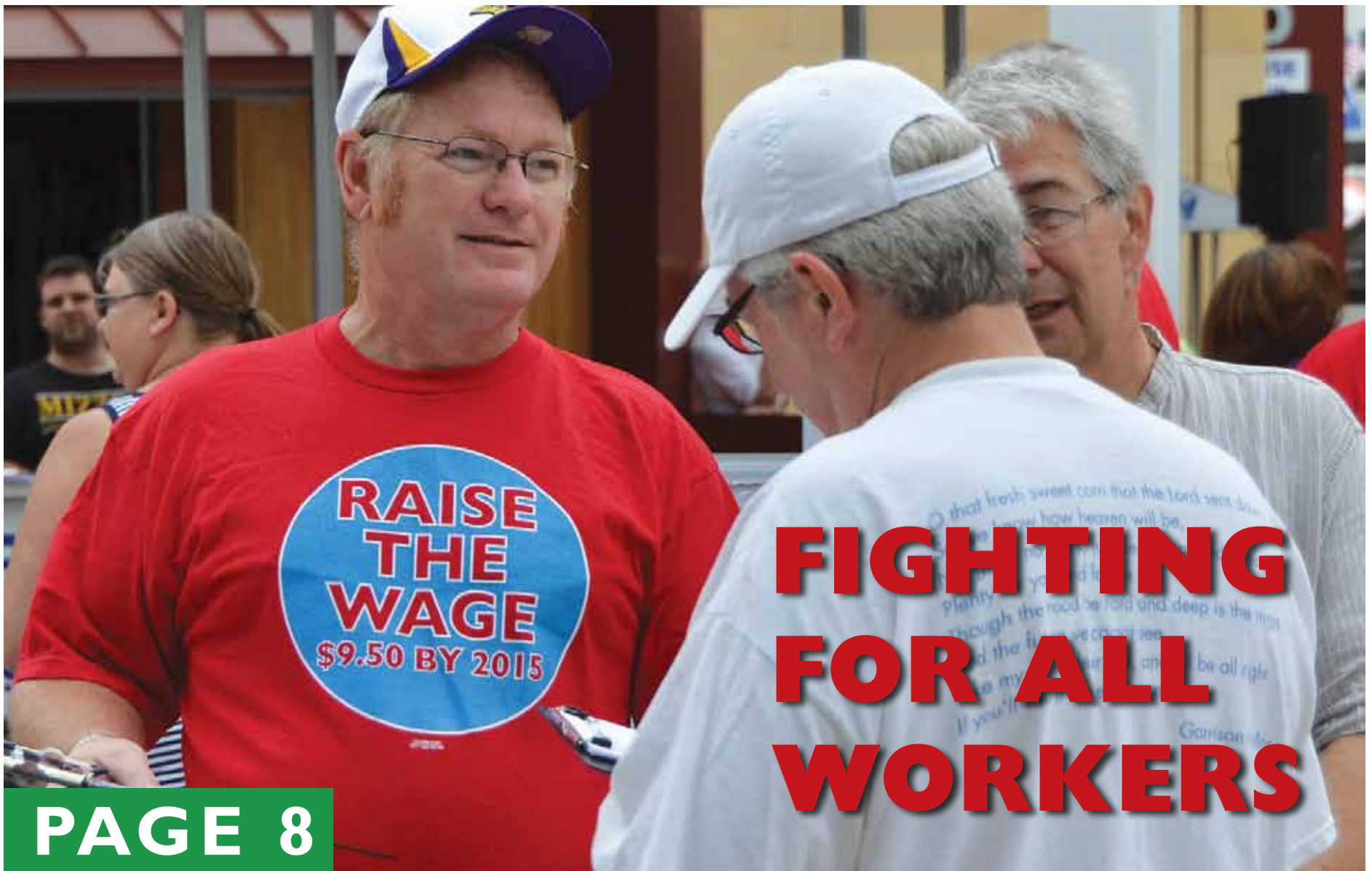


# Stepping UP

ONE STRONG, UNITED VOICE  
FOR MINNESOTA'S WORKERS

American Federation  
of State, County  
and Municipal  
Employees, AFL-CIO

Volume 8, No. 5  
September-October 2013



**PAGE 8**

AFSCME Council 5 is leading a statewide coalition to raise Minnesota's minimum wage to \$9.50/hour by 2015. Mike Cofield, of Local 638 at Minnesota State University-Mankato, was one of 80 AFSCME volunteers who collected nearly 6,000 signatures during the State Fair, urging state senators to raise the minimum wage.



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Shannon Wegscheid and Heather Hemmer, of Hennepin County Human Services Local 34, make sure parents live up to their child-support obligations.

**The Support  
Children Need**



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Rachel Colombe, of Local 3558, helped workers at northern Minnesota's Human Development Center rediscover what it means to be a union.

**Putting It Back  
Together Again**

# SETTING THE PACE



The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom attracted 250,000 people – the largest demonstration ever in the nation's capital up to that point.

## Marching for jobs and justice – again

**D**emonstrators marched for jobs and justice in 1963. Their signs demanded “Jobs for All,” “Voting Rights,” and “An End to Bias.” They protested the vigilante killing of an unarmed black teenager in the South and his killer’s acquittal.

Fifty years later, Trayvon Martin is dead. George Zimmerman is free. Seven Southern states have new restrictions that suppress the votes of people of color. Many of the issues that gave rise to the original March on Washington still plague America today: poverty, hunger, unemployment, and the need to protect human dignity and voting rights.

Today, the black unemployment rate is nearly double that of whites; that’s almost the same ratio as in 1963. Cheap-labor conservatives continue to drive down wages. More Americans qualify for food stamps than ever before, and one out of every five children in the United States is living in poverty. Sixty million workers say they’d join a union today, if they could; a union card would be their ticket out of poverty. Those jarring facts show a clear need for a 21st-century movement for civil rights and worker rights.

### No time to quit

On Aug. 28, 2013, AFSCME and our allies marched again for jobs and justice, recommitting ourselves to the struggles that still confront working families across America. Every one of us can stand in solidarity with those who marched on Washington, D.C.

- We can demand that our leaders create good jobs for everyone who wants to work.
- We can demand that they rebuild the middle class by helping workers organize unions.
- We can demand that our leaders invest in strong communities where everyone has access to affordable housing, quality schools, parks and libraries, and safe streets.
- We can demand that our leaders stop slashing vital programs like Social Security and Medicare.



Edith Lee-Payne was 12 years old when she joined the March on Washington in 1963. Fifty years after this iconic photo was taken, she remains a visible and vocal community activist in Detroit.

- We can demand that our leaders immediately strengthen the Voting Rights Act in the wake of reckless rulings by the Supreme Court and the constant drumbeat of voter suppression.
- We can demand that Congress fix our broken immigration system and create a pathway to citizenship that reflects our shared values of fairness, opportunity, and justice.
- We can demand that our political and community leaders work toward an America where opportunity is abundant and prosperity is shared.

AFSCME will continue to march until every worker has respect on the job, wages that can raise a family, health care that’s affordable, and a retirement that’s dignified. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “The labor movement was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress.”

Eliot Seide  
Executive director



AFSCME Council 5 is a union of 43,000 workers who provide the vital services that make Minnesota happen. We advocate for excellence in public services, dignity in the workplace, and opportunity and prosperity for all workers.

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## Stepping UP

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# A stand-up kind of guy

*Correctional officer is taking a career in comedy seriously*

**W**hen you think of “funny,” a prison guard is not the first image that comes to mind. But Local 1988’s Josh Fergusson makes that transition every time he steps on stage, grabs the microphone, squints at the spotlight, and tries to make people laugh.

Fergusson, a correctional officer at the state women’s prison in Shakopee, has spent the past two years moonlighting as a stand-up comic. “I got to the point where I realized I was denying myself something I wanted to do,” he says.

## Back from a long break

Fergusson first tried stand-up shortly after he graduated from high school. He drove the two hours from Austin, where he lived, to “open mic” nights in Minneapolis. But the comedy scene in the Twin Cities was too much like high school cliques, he says.

“I thought the material should merit if I get more stage time, rather than whose ass I kissed. You really have to be careful who you trust.”

So, for the next 15 years, he settled into a more typical life. “I’m a working-class guy – I need a day job. I can’t be like these guys who lived out of their car for 5 or 10 years.”

But two years ago, he decided to give it another try. “My job allows me the freedom to pursue it,” he says. “The contract allows paid vacation and shift exchanges to get the time off.”

Professionally, he received encouragement from the likes of Josh Denny, a childhood friend who enjoyed stand-up success in the Twin Cities before moving on to Los Angeles.

## Working – and handling a crowd

Most of Fergusson’s stage time still comes at “open mic” nights. But this past summer was unusually busy. He had six paying gigs, has club dates scheduled later this fall, and is trying to finalize plans for a two-week stint in England.

“I will only get better if I keep doing it. It’s like training for a sport, or anything. It’s a journey you have to take. The microphone and the stage can be scary at times. But when you get in there, there’s an adrenaline dump.”

Learning to control the room, build a set, and read the audience are all part of the process. So is handling hecklers.

## ON STAGE

Catch Josh Fergusson’s stand-up routine:

- **Oct. 29:** At “Hit or Miss Tuesday,” House of Comedy, Mall of America Level 4 East, Bloomington. 7:30 p.m.
- **Nov. 9:** Eagles Club, 107 11th St. NE, Austin, 7 p.m.
- **Nov. 16:** The Hollow Light Lounge, 25 Cleveland St., Black River Falls, Wis., 8 p.m.

“No two hecklers are the same. Sometimes you can make them part of your act, sometimes you have to remind them they’re not part of your act.

“You have some hecklers who are on your side, but they interrupt the flow. You have to handle them gently. Then you get the other kind. I go after them, and I’m not nice. I’m very visceral. Bring it on – I will eviscerate you.”

Fergusson cites Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, and Sam Kinison among his influences. His topics include fast food, flying, locker room etiquette, and the differences between parts of the country.

He’s got more than an hour’s worth of material he considers polished enough to perform, and is constantly refining and adding to that set.

One consistent theme is what he describes as “backwards states passing backwards laws.” Pushing politically or socially sensitive topics is “something you can explore in comedy – get people laughing about it, but thinking about it, so they pay more attention next time they see it.”

## Keeping his day job at a distance

There are few prison jokes in his repertoire. “Unless you work in that environment, no one’s going to care or relate to it,” he says.

The closest he comes is popping perceptions people might have about “women in prison,” based on films like “Chained Heat” or the Netflix series “Orange is the New Black.”

Fergusson doesn’t use humor much when he puts on the uniform, either.

“There are situations where I can read when offenders will be receptive to using appropriate humor to handle a situation. But I also have to read when it’s absolutely not appropriate.” ■



Local 1988’s Josh Fergusson says he’s a realist about a comedy career. “If I get the ‘hit the lottery’ moment, I would be euphoric. It would be a dream come true. But it’s a labor of love. I do it because I love it.”



CCPT’s Lisa Thompson meets with U.S. education secretary Arne Duncan.

## Taking their case to the top

Lisa Thompson, president of Council 5’s Child Care Providers Together, met with U.S. education secretary Arne Duncan about the benefits of expanding investments in early childhood education, which CCPT has been promoting for

years. The investments help ensure that preschool children receive quality care so they are ready to succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

Thompson met with Duncan while he was in Bloomington to promote an Obama administration plan that nearly doubles what Gov. Dayton and the Legislature are investing in preschool scholarships for disadvantaged children.

## Know your voting basics for Nov. 5

Trying to figure out who gets your vote on Nov. 5 in your local city council, mayoral, school board, or other municipal elections?

- Check out AFSCME Council 5’s endorsements at <http://afscmemn.org/afscme-endorsed-candidates>.
- To find out where you vote, go to <http://pollfinder.sos.state.mn.us>
- To understand how instant runoff voting works in Minneapolis or St. Paul, watch this short, easy-to-understand video from Minnesota Public Radio: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_5SLQXNpzsk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_5SLQXNpzsk)

## More workers join AFSCME

Three new groups of workers have organized to join Council 5. We welcome:

- 15 food service workers at **Ecumen Scenic Shores Nursing Home** in Two Harbors, who joined AFSCME Local 2032. The kitchen staff works for New Horizons Food Service, an outside contractor. Local 2032 already represents about 60 care workers at Scenic Shores (which previously was known as Sunrise).
- 20 workers at **Crisis Connection**, who joined AFSCME through an NLRB election. Crisis Connection is a nonprofit mental health agency based in Richfield. Staff provide crisis counseling through hotlines that function statewide.
- A dozen **medical examiner inspectors**, who joined Local 2864 through a voluntary recognition agreement with Hennepin County. The inspectors process evidence and other information gathered at crime scenes and other sites where there is a death. (Technicians and assistants in the medical examiner’s office already are members of Local 34.)

# Putting it back

*Workers at Human Development Center had a union, but it was a union on paper only. This year, they changed that in a hurry.*

**W**orkers at Human Development Center – a private mental-health agency along the North Shore – were backed into a corner. They already had rejected one “final offer” from the employer. Then they rejected a second “final offer.” They set a strike deadline. A mediator had scheduled one, last-ditch bargaining session.

Then HDC pulled a fast one. Management decided it was done bargaining. Rather than risk a strike, HDC instead imposed its final offer – an offer workers already had rejected.

Among the terms HDC hoped it could force down workers’ throats was a “no strike, no lockout” clause. That language prevented workers from walking out, and also restricted some of the other public actions workers could take.

“People were angry, very angry,” says union negotiator Laurel Leonzal.

**Not rolling over**

At a meeting where workers hashed out what to do next, member Sue Hall stood up and started singing. She sang the chorus from Woody Guthrie’s “Union Maid” – “Oh, you can’t scare me, I’m sticking to the union, I’m sticking to the union, I’m sticking to the union...”

“We were all kind of taken aback for a second,” says Mindy Reid, who was in charge of strike committee activities. Then co-workers started

singing along. “We did,” Reid says. “In unison. A capella.”

“That was awesome,” Chelsea Cadwell says. “That was goose bumps.”

Out of that moment, workers decided they were going to stick with each other. Yes, they would pursue federal charges to overturn what they believed were illegal practices by HDC. But workers were also going to force their way back to the bargaining table. They were going to show that they no longer could be isolated and intimidated. They were going to get a contract on their terms, not the employer’s terms.

And they did.

“They basically tried breaking us,” says Rachel Colombe, another union negotiator. “They did whatever they could to shut us up. But we’re still here.”

**Back from being invisible**

The truth is, the workers’ display of power and unity would have been impossible a year earlier. A year earlier, by any definition, the union at HDC existed in name only. About half the roughly 170 workers were not paying dues. There were times when only two people showed up at the monthly union meeting.

Colombe and Leonzal became the negotiating team because no one else stepped forward. “When we got

**“They basically tried breaking us. They did whatever they could to shut us up. But we’re still here.”**

**– Rachel Colombe**



**Laurel Leonzal: “I don’t know how many times I heard, ‘I thought we were alone. We didn’t know there were others who felt the same way.’”**

involved, we had no idea who the union people were,” Leonzal says. “There was just no information.”

At work, managers targeted employees if they talked union. Union material routinely disappeared from bulletin boards. New hires were warned against getting involved.

“Some of them would be specifically told not to talk to me because of who I was,” says Cadwell, who was chair of the HDC bargaining unit. That was illegal, too, but managers got away with it because no one pushed back.

High turnover, and the geographic spread of the agency, did not make it any easier to keep the union active.

The consequences of inaction were predictable. In the previous three-year contract, no one got pay raises. “We did lose quite a bit,” Colombe says. “There were only a handful of people who voted. There was no support.”

When a new round of negotiations started – to replace the contract that expired on Dec. 31, 2012 – HDC maneuvered to get even more concessions.

**Rebuilding connections**

Reid was new in HDC’s Cloquet office. She started attending union meetings, she says, “because I felt like, our contract is ending, and I haven’t heard anything.” What she found out stunned her.

“I started to say, ‘Do you guys know what’s going on? They really are going to take away all of our sick

**A lesson for the future**

The HDC experience showed other bargaining units in Local 3558 what they need to do prepare for similar challenges. “In unity, there is power,” says Dale Minkinen, who is vice president of the local. “If you believe in the unity, then you will have the power. There’s no better example than here at HDC, what they’ve done.”

“United you stand, divided you fall,” says HDC bargaining team member Laurel Leonzal. “It’s the only way.”

time, and even though you’ve been at HDC 12 years, you’re going to lose it all. Like, we’ve got to do something.’”

So Reid started by doing something simple: She collected email addresses of co-workers. It was the first step to building an agency-wide network to keep co-workers informed and involved.

Reid, Cadwell, Colombe, and Leonzal held small group meetings. They found members at each location who volunteered as contact people – who would relay information to their co-workers. They sent email updates – and gave printouts to people who didn’t have a home email. They created a phone tree. They created a Facebook page – not only as another source of information, but also so members in different offices could discuss what was going on.



**Mindy Reid: “Having other unions support us was amazing. It wasn’t just our world anymore. It was everyone.”**



# together again



**Rachel Colombe:** “At first, we were the union. Part of it was turning people around to realize they are the union.”

“It was kind of a snowball effect,” Colombe says. “You gather one person, and that person reached out, then you gather another person, and that person reached out. It’s just a matter of grabbing one person, and keep going.”

## ‘We’ are the union

“The union” became visible on the job. Despite the intimidation that management continued to use, workers gradually took back their workplace.

Members wore union buttons, union bracelets, and green clothing to work. “That was our thing – wear green on your staff meeting day,” Cadwell says. “People were talking, and management was hearing people talk. And they were not happy about people talking.”

Cadwell set a standard for fearlessness. She refused to back down even when her supervisor shadowed her. “I mean, Chelsea



**Chelsea Cadwell:** “People would complain and complain, and I said, ‘I don’t even want to hear it unless you’re going to do something about it.’ But people are willing to get on board. You’ve just got to ask.”

couldn’t breathe without her supervisor being behind her, in case she might say something,” Colombe says. Cadwell even wore union colors during an interview for a different job.

“A lot of it was letting members know: *They* are the union,” Leonzal says. “They have a part. You may not be able to come to a meeting. You may not be able to do the gauntlet. But just wearing that bracelet during staff meetings, talking to other people. Whatever you can do, that’s valuable. And people respond to that.”

Members took all kinds of actions to demonstrate support for their bargaining team, and to demonstrate their individual resolve. It wasn’t just token support, either; the number of members paying dues increased by 60 percent.

During one bargaining session, members drove around outside, honking car horns. At another session, HDC negotiators had to navigate a gauntlet – a human tunnel of union members chanting and waving signs.

“Oh, it was loud out there,” Leonzal says. That demonstration wasn’t just HDC members. It was teachers and letter carriers. It was other AFSCME members from city, county and state agencies. “We had people from Moose Lake, the Range, all over the place.”

That show of solidarity happened because Local 3558 members spoke at central labor council meetings and to every local union that would give them a few minutes on the agenda.

“People’s mailmen were telling them, ‘Oh, I hear HDC is striking. I just want you to know I support you guys.’ People’s mailmen were saying that!” Reid says. “That was huge.”

## Making management see green

After HDC tried to implement its version of the contract, members didn’t stop. They put their names on petitions and hand-delivered them to the HDC board of directors. More than 100 workers wrote individual emails to the CEO.

## Clients come first

The HDC workers are the largest bargaining unit in Local 3558, which represents a variety of nonprofits in northern Minnesota. HDC has offices in Cloquet, Grand Marais, Two Harbors, and a half dozen sites in Duluth. (Its office in Superior, Wis., is not unionized.)

“It is really just an astounding group of people that work there,” says Rachel Colombe. “What those employees do for those clients out there, that’s amazing. And there’s not a single one of us that’s there because of the money. It’s because those clients come before anything else.”

And, to show they weren’t finished, members wore buttons that read: “I’m on break, are you on break?”

“It shows we’re not going to stop talking about this,” Reid says. “We’ll just take a break to talk about it.”

Their refusal to quit worked. Members did force HDC back to the bargaining table. They ratified a new contract that made clear improvements over what HDC had imposed in May.

Members also brought the hammer down on HDC in another way. The agency was forced to settle charges with the National Labor Relations Board. In the settlement, HDC agrees publicly not to do 10 things that violate workers’ rights. Those include prohibiting workers from talking about the union, and threatening or disciplining workers who do.

And the workers got one final piece of satisfaction: The human resources director – the woman who led HDC’s fight against the union – was fired. ■

## University locals lead fight over health insurance

AFSCME activists at the University of Minnesota are mobilizing co-workers at every level to fight proposals that would shift millions in health-insurance costs onto campus workers.

“This is not a small change,” says Barb Bezat, president of Technical Local 3937. “This is going to have a huge impact, and it doesn’t have to happen.”

“This is a straight-up effort to take 1.8 million dollars from employees each and every year, beginning this January,” says Cherrene Horazuk, president of Clerical Workers Local 3800. “They plan to make us pay more while the university pays less and pockets the difference.”

University administrators say the changes are needed to comply with the national Affordable Care Act. AFSCME locals say that’s not true.

What administrators really are doing, union leaders say, is using health reform as a ruse to stick campus



**Activists march through the Twin Cities campus in August to raise awareness of the university’s health-insurance proposal.**

workers with higher costs. Even the lowest-paid employees would pay hundreds more each year in deductibles, premiums, and co-pays.

## Unions propose fees based on income

Unions say the university has time to explore and implement alternatives. Those options include a sliding fee scale based on an employee’s income and family size.

A sliding scale recognizes that \$200 more in medical costs has a bigger impact on a worker making \$25,000 than it does on an administrator making \$250,000, Horazuk says.

The university’s proposal, she suggests, is another sign that “the people at the top have lost touch with reality. They have no idea about the struggles and challenges that the rest of us have, to pay our bills and survive on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis.”

# The support kids need

*County child-support officers strive to help parents live up to their obligations*

**S**ome days, all they do is yell at you,” Heather Hemmer says. “The mother will get mad because she’s not getting the money. The father will get mad because he’s not making enough to make his payments *and* pay rent.

“So we get it from both sides. They don’t think you’re doing your job, or they think you’re doing it too well.”

Hemmer is a child-support officer in Hennepin County. Her job is to track down people – usually fathers – who quit paying the child support they’ve been ordered to pay.

Child-support payments are crucial; they often are the difference that allows a family to be self-sufficient – or not. In Hennepin County, about 57 percent of the families receiving child support used to be on welfare.

## Job market takes its toll

In the four years Hemmer has been enforcing child-support orders, she has found very few fathers who deliberately evade their obligation if they have the money. “A lot of people will refer to my clients as deadbeat dads,” she says. “That’s not accurate.

“A lot of people are doing the best they can. They’re still involved in their children’s lives. They know they have an obligation. But they don’t have the resources. You can’t pay child support without a job.”

When a court orders child-support payments, it sets the amount at a level the parent should be able to afford, based on actual income or potential income.

Payments are withheld from the parent’s paycheck. The employer sends the amount to the state, which

## The cost-benefit ratio

If a mother receives child support but remains on public assistance – which is the case about 14 percent of the time in Hennepin County – child support directly reduces the taxpayers’ outlay, dollar for dollar.

In 2012, the county estimates, it collected \$3.25 for every \$1 it spent on enforcement.

then sends it to the other parent. In 2012, the state collected \$594 million in child-support payments.

In Hennepin County, about two-thirds of the 55,000 parents who are ordered to pay child support do so, the county says. That means about one-third don’t.

Parents who wind up in Hemmer’s enforcement files are in that group. They have fallen at least four months behind on what they owe.

## Getting payments on track

“Typically, their life circumstances change,” Hemmer says. “They had a good job 10 years ago, but they lose that job. They may not be able to find jobs in their skill set. They may only be able to get a part-time job at minimum wage. A lot of them are working for temporary agencies.

“There’s individual choice involved, but there’s also a societal role.

“It’s hard to find jobs that let people pay their bills. They may not be able to take care of themselves *and* their children. They get so far behind, they give up.”

By this time, a collections officer like



Local 34’s Shannon Wegscheid: “You can tell if they’re really trying and really care, or if they’re just angry and not going to cooperate with anybody.”

Shannon Wegscheid also is involved. She’s in contact with the delinquent parent at least every 30 days. She examines income and expenses, and tries to work out a payment plan that gets the parent caught up.

Child-support officers don’t have the individual authority to change payments; only a court can do that. However, if the father can afford a smaller amount, officers will work with him so he can file the motion that’s necessary to reduce his payment. Sometimes, Wegscheid can refer fathers to programs that help them with financial management.

If the father doesn’t get on top of his obligation, the amount that’s past due keeps piling up. So does the interest. And that obligation doesn’t disappear when the child turns 18.

“We really do try to empower



“It could be they’re evading,” Local 34’s Heather Hemmer says of parents who owe child support. “But more commonly, it’s because times are tough.”

people to take responsibility for their situation,” Wegscheid says. Her biggest frustration is when delinquent parents ignore her phone calls and missed-payment letters. “Some people do think if they ignore it, it will just go away.” It doesn’t.

Instead, collections officers enforce a strict state timetable that will lead to the suspension of the delinquent parent’s driver’s license.

## Immigration reform makes economic sense, too

Immigration reform, such as what the U.S. Senate passed in June, “is not just the right thing to do for our country – it’s the smart thing to do for our economy,” Council 5 executive director Eliot Seide said while urging the state’s Congressional delegation to reform immigration policy.

In a meeting at the office of Congressman Eric Paulsen, Seide highlighted a new report from AFSCME International and the Center for American Progress. The report shows the often-overlooked economic benefits of fixing the nation’s broken immigration system.

The report says comprehensive reform would add hundreds of jobs and boost the state economy by \$480 million a year;



Asad Aliweyd, executive director of New American Academy, talks about the new energy and businesses that East African immigrants are bringing to the southwest suburbs.

provide more tax revenue for schools, infrastructure, and state and local services; help wipe out low-end employers who exploit workers, dodge taxes, and play by different rules than their law-abiding competition; and strengthen the financial stability of Medicare and Social Security

“Bottom line, this is good for the bottom line,” says Dane Smith, president of Growth & Justice, a Minnesota think tank.

## Bloomington workers win another court ruling

A state Appeals Court has upheld the choice of Bloomington parks workers to join AFSCME. A three-judge panel unanimously rejected a challenge by the city and instead agreed that the parks workers form an appropriate union bargaining unit.

The ruling was the last in a string of defeats for the city, which has been fighting its parks

workers since they filed for a union election in April 2012. The stall tactics cost Bloomington taxpayers \$100,000 in outside legal bills.

The two dozen workers now are trying to wrap up negotiations on their first contract.

## Judge upholds child-care organizing law

A federal judge dismissed two right-wing lawsuits July 28 and gave the go-ahead for in-home child-care providers to unionize in Minnesota. Chief Judge Michael Davis also refused to issue an injunction that would block a union election.

The judge’s rulings uphold a state law that allows a vote among 12,700 licensed and legally unlicensed providers who receive state subsidies. Council 5 has been working with providers for eight years to help them gain a voice in lifting their profession and improving the quality of care they provide.

# BRIEFS



## Finding fathers is the first step

**B**efore you can establish child support, sometimes you have to determine paternity first. That's Lindsay Schwab's job – doing the investigation and leg work that allows a judge to legally declare who a child's father is.

Getting a father listed on a birth certificate is necessary for more than establishing financial responsibility.

“Once you have that legal relationship,” Schwab says, “a child would have the same rights as a child born within a marriage: having access to the father's medical history, inheritance rights, access to benefits such as Social Security survivor benefits. And just the right to know who their father is, their cultural identity.”

### Voluntary – or not

Schwab gets most of her cases when a mother applies for medical assistance with a newborn, or applies for some form of public aid for a child. Paternity cases open automatically when a mother participates in the Minnesota Family Investment Program, or starts receiving Medical Assistance, MinnesotaCare health insurance, or child-care assistance.

Hennepin establishes paternity in 99 percent of its cases, one of the best rates in the nation. Sometimes, it's easy. The father can sign a notarized “recognition of parentage” form, which voluntarily settles the legal issue. Other cases are not easy at all.

“Sometimes they know who the dad is, sometimes they're not sure,” Schwab says of the mothers she

deals with. In those cases – more than 1,200 times last year – the county does genetic testing.

“That can be interesting,” Schwab says, “because sometimes the mom is so sure it's one guy, and it's not. So, I'm sometimes the bearer of bad news. Sometimes, the dad really wants to be the dad, and he's not. So that can be challenging. The outcome isn't what the client wanted, and you just kind of feel bad for them.”

### Finding the truth

Sometimes, Schwab has to try to track down the alleged father, because the mother has lost touch. Other times, the mother is lying – even though not cooperating can cost mothers 25 percent of their public assistance.

“So, what is the truth?” Schwab says. “I'm trying to find that. She might be saying, ‘Oh, I don't know where he is,’ but they're really living together, that type of thing. Or there are pictures on Facebook of them together, all happy, from last month, when she's telling me, ‘Oh, I haven't talked to him since I was seven months' pregnant.’”

There are other reasons a mother doesn't want child support. One is that their welfare check will shrink dollar for dollar. “So, they don't want their grant reduced,” Schwab says. “Though they're still getting the same amount, it's coming from the father versus the taxpayer, and he may not be as reliable.”

But in other cases, “it's more the mothers are hesitant of having



**Local 34's Lindsay Schwab:**  
“I try to build trust with my parents, so they don't feel like we're super intrusive – because we are. We're getting into their personal business. When you get public aid, that's what needs to happen.”

the father involved, for whatever reason. They just don't think he's a good role model.” Often, mothers will give up their public assistance and go it alone rather than deal with child-support issues.

“Sometimes, there's safety concerns between the parties. If they have a legitimate safety concern and there's an order for protection, we will not proceed on those cases, because we don't want to harm the client or her children even more,” Schwab says.

### Remaining neutral

Once paternity is established, Schwab works with a county attorney to develop the court case that settles the matter legally. She usually has to be in court once a week to shepherd cases through.

At that time, the court not only declares paternity, it also settles primary custody, parenting time, and child support. Schwab, like other child-support officers, remains neutral in how custody and visitation are divided up. “We're

more concerned about getting the financial pieces in place, because public money – taxpayers' money – is supporting this kid.”

Once the court order comes through, Schwab enters it into the database and, if necessary, sends the paperwork out to an employer to begin withholding child-support payments. She closes the case on her end by transferring it to enforcement.

### Playing therapist

Getting to that point, however, requires listening, sensitivity, the ability to mediate between parents, and understanding the dynamics of different families and cultures, Schwab says.

“I feel I've been able to deal with the drama pretty well. Sometimes I'm a little bit of a therapist, letting them talk about everything that's gone wrong, trying to be as empathetic as I can. It's a lot of hand holding, letting them vent, but staying on track.”

That, Wegscheid says, only makes things worse. “It really affects their life. A lot of people say, ‘How can you expect them to work if they don't have a driver's license?’

“I hate to see them lose a job if they lose their driver's license. But in Minnesota, a driver's license is a privilege. If you're not supporting

your kid, do you get that privilege?”

If suspending the driver's license doesn't bring compliance, the parent can be cited for contempt of court and face jail time.

### Caught in the middle

Wegscheid and Hemmer say it is never easy navigating the emotions

involved in child-support cases.

“Nobody wants to be told how to support their family,” Wegscheid says. “Whether they're cooperating or not, most parents' goal is to provide for their kids one way or another. But there are situations where they both feel the system is bent against them. I can understand that. Rules are rules.

Dealing with that can be frustrating.”

One of the biggest challenges, she says, is overcoming “this perception we are sexist or on someone's side.”

The reality, she says, is “we're trying to help the whole family. But we also are enforcement officers. To the person supposed to be paying support, it doesn't sound neutral.” ■



Melinda Pearson, of MnSCU Local 4001, speaks to a rally of AFSCME Next Wave members who marched on Detroit's Hart Plaza, protesting Michigan's emergency manager laws.

### Standing up for public workers

Minnesota Next Wave activists witnessed first-hand the impact that Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder's right-wing policies are having on workers. Those policies include new “right to work” laws that undermine unions,

and “emergency financial manager” laws, which are undermining democracy and unseating legally elected governments in Detroit and other cities in Michigan.

During AFSCME International's Next Wave conference in July, more than 40 Council 5 activists also took leadership training, learned labor history, joined panel discussions with members from the 1968 Memphis sanitation strike, and heard from nationally prominent speakers such as Van Jones.

### Taking action against hunger

One in 10 Minnesotans does not know where his or her next meal is coming from. Forty percent of those are children. That's why AFSCME is taking part in the “Go Orange” campaign during National Hunger Action Month.

During our convention, we're collecting donations for CHUM's emergency food shelf in Duluth. To find out how you can take action against hunger where you live, visit Second Harvest Heartland's website at [www.2harvest.org](http://www.2harvest.org); click “How to Help.”

### Redesigned website is easier to use

Council 5 has renovated its website with an easier-to-navigate structure and a cleaner, photo-driven design. Take a look at [www.afscmemn.org](http://www.afscmemn.org).

### Stepping Up wins 3 first-place awards

Council 5's *Stepping Up* magazine won three first-place and four second-place awards in the annual labor media contest sponsored by the International Labor Communications Association.

Editor Michael Kuchta won the top honor, the Max Steinbock Award, for a 2012 article that explored staffing issues at state group homes.

*Stepping Up* also won first-place awards for:

- Best Profile, for an article about the work of plumbers and other trades crews at Stillwater state prison, which ran in September-October 2012
- Best Political Action story, for an article about member activism at the Legislature, which ran in March-April 2012



# AFSCME leads fight to raise state's minimum wage

**N**obody can live on a minimum-wage job anymore. That's why AFSCME is helping lead a statewide campaign of unions, faith groups, and community organizations to raise Minnesota's minimum wage to \$9.50/hour by 2015.

More than 80 Council 5 volunteers gave the campaign a visible and powerful start at the State Fair. They collected cards from nearly 6,000 people who want the state Senate to "Raise the Wage!" (The House already voted for the \$9.50 minimum wage this spring.)

Minnesota's current minimum is \$6.15 an hour, the third-worst in the nation. The federal minimum – \$7.25/hour – has failed to keep up with inflation; it is worth only two-thirds of what it was.

## A promise broken

Unions such as AFSCME are in the fight even though few union members would benefit directly. But the deteriorating value of the minimum wage violates a fundamental American principle: If you work hard and play by the rules, you ought to be able to support yourself and raise a family.

Julie Casey, of Minneapolis Local 9, sees her children as an example of how that's no longer the case. Her 25-year-old son and 22-year-old daughter both are out of college but still living at home. Both hold down fast-food jobs while looking for work in the professions they studied for.

By the time you add up rent, food, utilities, transportation, and student loans, neither can afford to live on their own, even if they took



Marijo Hain (left), Anoka DHS Local 1307, and Johnathon White, Minneapolis Public Schools Local 56, were among AFSCME volunteers drumming up support for raising the minimum wage.

## AFSCME in action



For more photos from the Fair, scan this QR code with your mobile device. Or see Council 5's Flickr stream. Go to [www.flickr.com/photos/afscmemn](http://www.flickr.com/photos/afscmemn); click "Sets," then "Raise the Wage!"

on roommates, Casey says.

If her son continues at minimum wage, "with all those student loans, it will be 10 years before he gets ahead at all," Casey says. "And, boy, I'd sure like to have my own house back sooner or later."

## When work doesn't pay

Popular misconceptions claim the minimum wage is mostly for teenagers, or that a higher wage eliminates jobs. Both are false.

In reality, 85 percent of workers who earn minimum wage are adults. More money on payday boosts their spending power and boosts our economy. That's one reason why 15 years of studies show that a higher minimum wage does not cut employment.

It's also not true that it is small-business owners who benefit most from holding down the minimum wage. In fact, two-thirds of minimum-wage jobs are at big companies with at least 100 employees. Most are in just two industries: retail stores

(such as Wal-Mart), and leisure and hospitality (such as hotels, restaurants, and fast-food joints).

A low minimum wage means taxpayers actually subsidize these companies. Local 517's Christine Main is an employment counselor in Washington County. Most of the clients she helps still qualify for welfare benefits, she says, because their jobs pay so little.

Local 66's Deb Strohm sees the same thing in Duluth. "It's kind of a vicious circle," Strohm says. Stringing together low-wage jobs, often part-time, seldom pays enough to make ends meet.

"They just about throw their hands up in the air because, quite simply, it costs them money to go out and go to work." ■



**47**

That's how many **states** have a higher minimum wage than Minnesota's rate of \$6.15/hour<sup>1</sup>

**4**

That's how many **full-time jobs** a Minnesota family (two adults and two children) needs to make ends meet – if the jobs pay minimum wage<sup>2</sup>

**\$10.74**

What the minimum wage would be – if it had kept up with **inflation** over the past 45 years<sup>3</sup>

**360,000**

How many Minnesota workers will get a **pay raise** when the Legislature raises the state's minimum wage to \$9.50/hour<sup>4</sup>

**85%**

That's how many minimum-wage workers are **adults** (not teenagers at an after-school job)<sup>5</sup>

**\$15,080 a year**

How much a **full-time worker** makes at the federal minimum wage of \$7.25/hour

**\$472 million**

How much more consumer spending will be pumped into Minnesota's economy each year with a minimum wage of \$9.50/hour<sup>6</sup>

## SOURCES

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6 Jobs Now Coalition, "Policy Brief: Minimum Wage," [www.jobsnowcoalition.org/initiatives/labor-standards/minimum-wage.html](http://www.jobsnowcoalition.org/initiatives/labor-standards/minimum-wage.html)