

Drilling Down into the Role of the Mysterious Policy Committee

What Is It? and What Does It Do?

Every two years our Union and the State of Minnesota engage in contract negotiations with the aim of, broadly speaking, balancing the needs of the state employees with those of the state and its agencies. The negotiation process between Labor and Management brings forth from both sides their emerging concerns; and also clarifies existing practices, procedures, and policies. The end-product is a mutually agreed upon contract that governs our working relationship for the next two years. Our current contract is set to expire on June 30 at the end of the 2-year term. The Union will begin gearing up for negotiations in January.

Perhaps you are new to MnDOT and aren't very familiar with the whole contract negotiation thing. Or perhaps you've been with MnDOT for several years now, but you may still not know all that much about the process. This article will shed some light on the nuts and bolts, and overall structure, of the negotiation process. Let's address this question: ***how do the needs of the employees make their way into the final ratified contract?***

Let's start with the big picture: almost every State agency is comprised of employees who are AFSCME Union members. Some of those agencies include Agriculture, Commerce, Corrections, Health, Human Services, Natural Resources, Revenue, Public Safety, Transportation, Pollution Control, and Information Technology. The contract between AFSCME and the State applies to ALL workers in ALL of these different departments. There is the person taking groundwater samples, the person processing tax forms, the person inspecting farm operations, the person conducting a resident wellness check, the person calibrating fuel pumps, the person re-setting your login password, and the person plowing snow on the highway. And because there are so many different agencies, each with their own specialized needs, the contract also includes dozens of Supplemental Agreements, each of which is specific to each individual department or agency. In fact, the next time you pick up a copy of the contract book you will see that the first one-third of the written contract applies to all agencies, while the remaining two-thirds of the contract contains the supplemental agreements.

Hopefully by now you are starting to realize that the folks in MnDOT are not the only employees affected by the negotiation process, otherwise known as collective bargaining.

Let's zoom in a little closer: National Unions in general structurally manage the needs of their members by compartmentalizing everyone into what are called **Councils**. AFSCME is a national union and has members all across the United States. The members of AFSCME are by definition

public employees at the state, county, and municipal levels of government. (Federal employees have their own union.) Each State contains AFSCME Councils which cover a large geographic region of a respective State. Here in Minnesota we have two Councils - generally, Council 5 covers state agencies, and Council 65 covers city and county agencies. The Council is basically an agent of AFSCME International in Washington DC, and their task is to implement Union activity and oversight within their region.

Councils similarly manage the needs of their members by compartmentalizing everyone into what are called **Locals**. A Local is also made up of union members from a geographic area, hence the name "Local" to signify a small region within the Council's area of coverage. So, for example, our Local is named Local 221. Local 221 covers the Metro DOT area and is part of Council 5.

AFSCME further divides agency employees into **Bargaining Units** to better reflect the nature of the work being conducted. For example, Unit 2 covers members whose work involves craft, maintenance, and labor TA & TG job classifications. MnDOT maintenance employees are part of Unit 2. Unit 4 covers health care workers; Unit 6 covers clerical and office workers; and Unit 7 covers technical workers; TGS, TS job classifications, Bridge, Construction, and crew leads. A Local may include members from several agencies within that geographic area. Local 221 indeed represents most of the bargaining units, but when you attend a union meeting you will see that Local 221 is heavily represented by Unit 2 MnDOT employees in the Metro area. This is not unusual; Union members within any of the agencies represented by AFSCME form their own Locals which are often heavily represented by one of the bargaining units.

You can begin to see the respective structures of the State agencies and of the Union, and how they relate to each other. But with dozens of agencies operating all over the State, and all of these Locals dotted everywhere, how does it all come together for contract negotiations?

From the Union's perspective, there needs to be a way to funnel each Local to a seat at the bargaining table. With 18,000 represented state employees and more than 150 Locals, it is obviously not feasible to physically bring everyone together. Instead, the Council authorizes the Locals to create a Committee to represent all of its Locals statewide, which then acts as a bridge or a liaison between the Council and all of its Locals. This statewide committee is called the **State Employee Policy Committee, or SEPC**. Their role is to coordinate the activities of the Local unions representing employees in the bargaining units and to advise and assist the Council on matters affecting the interests of their members. All Local unions must be involved in SEPC. The officers, executive board, and delegates of SEPC are the ones who bring forth, discuss, and vote on policy matters concerning union members.

SEPC in turn has authority to create its own versions of a policy committee. The committees under SEPC break out into more specialized employment areas to better focus on the needs of

employees within specific state agencies. So, for example, there is a statewide committee specific to the employees in MnDOT. This is the **Highway Employee Policy Committee, or HEPC.**

HEPC considers matters affecting MnDOT members. These issues may include but are not limited to areas such as the establishment and recommendation of bargaining goals; the establishment and recommendation of standard contract provisions; the exchange of information regarding the settlement of grievances; mutual assistance in organizing, servicing and bargaining; and, where appropriate, joint bargaining with the employer, including wages and healthcare benefits.

So, how do the needs of the employees make their way into the final ratified contract? By connecting the Union members at the Local level to the Council, by way of the Policy Committee. The work of the policy committees, both SEPC and HEPC, streamlines the proposals, ideas, and concerns coming from the Locals into manageable action items to be addressed at the Council level, including the items that make their way to the contract negotiation teams when they engage in labor/management discussions.

These Union structures, from International to Council to Locals to Policy Committees to Negotiation Teams, work together to accomplish the collective goals of the Union members across the State. Their combined efforts resolve into the ratified contract we receive every two years. If you would like to become a part of the contract negotiations process, start by attending your monthly Local general membership meetings. There are opportunities to run for Local offices and executive board, to volunteer as a delegate at Council events, to participate on a policy committee, and to be a part of a future negotiation team.

Remember, without the Union we are all reduced to At-Will employment status where the State can fire you at *any* time and for *any* reason, with NO mechanism available for you, beyond litigation at your own expense, to fight for your job or your legal rights as an employee. Support your Union and get involved. Only by standing together do we have Leverage and a Voice to influence our wages, benefits, working conditions, and our quality of life.