



AFSCME Organizer

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A Newsletter of AFSCME Clericals – University of Minnesota – Crookston, Minneapolis, Morris and St. Paul

We raised the floor to \$12...now let's Raise the Roof!

by Sandi Sherman, Cancer Center

The biggest victory that AFSCME Local 3800 achieved with our last contract was the establishment of a \$12 an hour minimum wage at the University of Minnesota. Twenty-five of 38 job classifications will no longer have starting wages ranging from \$7.20 to just below \$12 an hour. Kevin Ristau of the Jobs Now Coalition has told union activists that he knows of no other place in the country where a minimum wage of \$12 an hour has been achieved. The federal minimum wage currently stands at \$5.15 an hour.

Why is this so important for our union? Aside from the fact that no one can live

on the old minimums that the University paid (and \$12 / hour isn't enough either – more on that later), employers always set their pay scales from the bottom up. As long as wages are low at the bottom, it depresses everyone's wages. Many of us have watched University departments eliminate higher paid positions, laying off workers with years of service, while positions with lower starting salaries are created. A scan of today's HR job postings on the web will show that most posted positions today are in the office specialist area, with not a single union Executive Administrative Specialist position open. The same thing happens at workplaces all over the country. Raising the floor of wage scales begins to address this and is an important step in achieving a living wage for all.

How did we win this minimum wage increase? The fact is, we did not win this at the bargaining table during contract negotiations. University President Mark Yudof and the Board of Regents proposed this increase in the budget that they approved in the spring of 2001, well before university negotiators began to

discuss salary increases with our union negotiating team. Why did they do this? They did this because of the Livable Wage Campaign that AFSCME Local 3800 spearheaded beginning in the Fall of 1999. We published Talking Papers that educated our membership and the community about the issues, we organized in the hundreds to attend Regents meetings and rallies, we scandalized the University in the community and in the media for allowing a situation to exist where many of our members have to work more than one job to survive, we organized picketing of class-

room buildings – in short, it was the mobilization of our membership that won this.

This is an important lesson for us to absorb as we look forward to the next

round of contract negotiations. Nothing is won at the bargaining table by the 10 or 12 individuals that are selected to negotiate with the University administration unless we, the members of the union, act. Someone once said, "You get what you're big enough to take," and our experience with the Livable Wage Campaign bears that out.

In the coming months, in preparation for our next contract fight, one of our major goals must be to address the inequity in salary structure that the University administration purposefully created when they increased the floor of wages without implementing proportionate salary increases above the base, as our union had proposed. Last Fall over 700 union members, mostly of AFSCME Local 3800, signed letters to the Board of Regents committing us to the campaign for significant salary increases for long-term employees.

As we look forward to the next round of negotiations, we must remember how we raised the floor. Now we must mobilize ourselves to raise the roof! ★

The biggest victory that AFSCME Local 3800 achieved with our last contract was the establishment of a \$12 an hour minimum wage at the U of M.

If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did, and it never will.

–Frederick Douglass (1815-1896), abolitionist and former slave, from a speech on August 3, 1857

Women in the Labor Movement

by Michelle Lamere, Chemistry

This is a speech given at a celebration of International Women's Day, March 8th. Michelle Lamere is Vice President of AFSCME Local 3800.

Last November the membership of AFSCME 3800 had to make the very difficult decision—whether to accept their contract or to reject it and strike. Out of a 77% membership participation in the vote, 23% voted to reject the contract and strike.

What did it take for that 23% to make the decision they did?

One story in particular comes to mind. A woman who worked in the Medical Area was casting her ballot, as she was putting the ballot in the box her hand was visibly shaking very hard. She made eye contact with the union activist running the voting site and said, "I have always been a good girl. It was so hard for me to vote 'No'."

Voting to reject the contract and strike meant these people were willing to challenge their employer, to declare to the community that they demanded better, to fight until they got what they believed they deserved.

How does this relate to International Women's Day? Ninety-three percent of the clerical employees at the University are women. Many are single mothers and sole supporters of their households. Many are women of color.

As women come to understand the value of our labor and the power in withholding it we find that unions are a tool we can use to fight for our rights. For

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

Discipline Meeting? Request a Union Rep!

If you are called into a meeting with any management representative and believe that discipline may result, read them your *Weingarten Rights*:

"If this discussion could in any way lead to my being disciplined or terminated or affect my personal working conditions, I request that my union representative or steward be present at this meeting. Without representation I choose not to answer any questions."

If management says you will not be disciplined, ask for a written statement to that effect. If they give you the statement, you will have to participate. If they don't agree, stay for the meeting, take notes and contact your steward immediately afterwards.

If management says you may be disciplined but will not allow a union representative, read them your Weingarten rights, stay in the room, take notes and don't respond to any questions. Contact your steward immediately afterwards. ★

If you have a question or a problem arises, call the Chief Steward, Kelly Ahern Nelson, at 612-281-9010.

women to achieve improvements in our lives and the lives of our families we must become more active in the labor movement. We find strength in standing together to get our needs met.

By determining the conditions of our labor we will not only see material benefits, such as economic independence, adequate housing, healthful food, etc., but also greater self-respect and dignity, our ability to decide how our work affects and relates to our lives, and the ability to promote our values by demanding justice for women in the global work force.

In strengthening the labor movement the lives of women and families across the nation will improve instantly. For as we know, higher water raises all boats. By standing together we can improve our working conditions and strive to achieve dignity in our jobs. We must recognize our ability and responsibility to demand justice for ourselves and workers globally. ★



What is International Women's Day?

March 8 is International Women's Day. It is a day where, across the globe, women celebrate our contributions to the fight for a better world.

International Women's Day grew out of the struggle of working women in United States. In 1908, women, mainly from the garment industry, came together in New York City's Rutgers Square to demand a strong union in the needle trades and the right to vote. In 1910, Clara Zetkin, a German woman, having heard of the powerful protest in New York, proposed that March 8 be celebrated as International Women's Day worldwide. Today, it is a holiday celebrated every year by millions of working people around the world. ★

Upcoming Union Activities

APRIL 16 Contract Strategy Meeting to start planning and organizing our members for the next round of contract negotiations. 5:15 pm, 220 Coffey Hall, Saint Paul Campus

APRIL 25 Membership Meeting 5:15 pm 220 Coffey Hall

MAY 23 Membership Meeting 5:15 pm 330 Morrill Hall, East Bank

We will also be organizing informational meetings this month in as many buildings as possible, to talk with you about the new contracts that were recently distributed, and to gather support to continue the Livable Wage Campaign. Call the Local Office at 612-379-3918 to find out about the event closest to you, or to organize one in your building.

Come to your union's events and meetings!

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Thank you for reading this edition of the newsletter. Write or email us with your thoughts, ideas, and suggestions.

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