

Final Report

“Our Voices Our Future” AFSCME Town Meeting
 AFSCME 37th International Convention
 August 10, 2006
 Chicago McCormick Place



Almost 4,000 AFSCME delegates, alternates and facilitators gathered on the fourth day of the union’s 37th International Convention at Chicago’s McCormick Place to participate in our first-ever interactive Town Meeting. Participants identified collective priorities for building power and making AFSCME’s 21st Century Initiative a reality.

During the day-long discussion, delegates and alternates discussed concrete steps that need to be taken at every level of the union to mobilize more members, increase our political power, and organize more workers. Participants also designed AFSCME’s Leadership Institute – approved in a convention resolution this week – and developed ways to increase support for the work we do providing vital services to the public.

The AFSCME Town Meeting was convened so delegates could discuss specific ways to put the 21st Century Initiative into action in their local unions. The big question is: What changes do we need to make every day to involve more members and make our union stronger?



Participants at AFSCME’s historic “Our Voices Our Future” AFSCME Town Meeting.

Who Attended the AFSCME Town Meeting?

At the beginning of the day, participants’ demographics were compared to the actual demographics of AFSCME’s membership.

<u>Gender</u>	<u>Aug. 10</u>	<u>Membership</u>
Female	56%	56%
Male	44%	44%
<u>Age</u>		
25 and under	0%	1%
25-34	4%	10%
35-44	20%	22%
45-54	43%	39%
55-64	28%	24%
65 and better	5%	4%
<u>Race</u>		
African-American	32%	13%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2%	3%
Caucasian	53%	73%
Hispanic/Latino	7%	5%
Native American	2%	1%
Other Race	4%	4%
<u>Years in Union</u>		
Less than one year	1%	
2-5 Years	9%	
6-10 Years	17%	
11-20 Years	37%	
21-30 Years	27%	
More Than 30 Years	8%	

<u>Employer</u>	<u>Aug. 10</u>	<u>Membership</u>
College/University	7%	5%
School District	9%	13%
Federal Gov’t	1%	2%
State Gov’t	37%	34%
Local/County Gov’t	33%	39%
Non-Profit Org.	7%	4%
Private Company	2%	2%
Other	5%	
<u>Sector</u>		
Admin/Finance/Taxes	8%	2%
Environment/Agriculture	3%	4%
Health Care/Mental/EMS	22%	22%
Education	12%	21%
Law Enforce/Corrections	10%	11%
Public Works/Maintenance		
Parks	13%	14%
Transport./Motor Vehicles	6%	8%
Welfare/Human Services	14%	11%
Other Sector/Don’t Know	11%	5%

Our Voices. Our Future.

The goal of the AFSCME Town Meeting was to identify ways to get more members actively involved in the union. The Town Meeting was facilitated by AmericaSpeaks, using its trade-marked 21st Century Town Meeting methodology.

Delegates worked in small groups with facilitators to explore the challenges facing the union and develop specific actions that can be taken by the International, councils and affiliates, local unions and individual members.

Ideas generated in these discussions were collected through networked laptop computers at each table and throughout the room. Participants then used polling keypads to prioritize themes and action steps that surfaced throughout the meeting. These themes will help determine how we use our resources to address the challenges ahead.



Jean Diederich, Pres. Local 34, Minnesota Council 5, talked about the challenge of member activism.

Inspiration and Pride

At the beginning of the Town Meeting, participants were given a chance to introduce themselves to their tables, to share what inspired them to become actively involved in the union, and to identify what the union had done that made them most proud.

Inspiration for Becoming Involved

Participants discussed a range of reasons for becoming actively involved with AFSCME. Some of those reasons included being from a union family, workplace injustice, wanting to learn more about the union, improving and maintaining benefits, wanting a stronger voice and helping those without a voice.

Proud to be Part of the Union

AFSCME's solidarity and resulting political strength were reasons participants were proud to be members. Other reasons for pride were the union's ability to win strong contracts with good wages and benefits; speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves; gaining respect from management and holding them accountable; fighting and winning on closures, grievances, privatization; diversity; and solidarity at the local level.

Challenges Facing AFSCME

Participants also discussed the greatest challenges when it comes to keeping the union strong and winning real improvements for their members.

Following the discussion, participants used polling keypads to see what they had in common with their tablemates and other tables throughout the hall: Forty-three percent said the challenges that they discussed were very similar; 35 percent said the challenges at their table were similar; 17 percent said they shared some common challenges with others at their table; 2 percent said their challenges had little in common, and 3 percent said their challenges were very different.

Participants then used their keypads to prioritize the strongest room-wide themes that emerged from the challenges discussion.

Ranking of Top Challenges

Member apathy	64%
Union leadership honesty	30%
Privatization/outourcing	29%
Anti-union politicians	29%
Involving younger members	29%
Educating members	25%
Health care benefits	21%
Support for dues increase	18%
Activist burn out	14%

Crisis of Member Involvement

After hearing from Local 34 President Jean Diederich (Minnesota Council 5) about how they mobilized members in the Hennepin County fight and how our strength is in our member power, we discussed the obstacles to greater member involvement and the most important steps to get more members active.

Participants said fear of management retaliation, objections to the union's political activities, and the failure of the union to ask members to get involved were among the reasons that members choose not to become active. Others said members don't get involved because of inconvenient meeting locations, a belief that one person can't make a difference, and that paying dues is enough.

Participants were asked to discuss what the union does that turns members off. Reasons were spending too much time on problem members; pushiness about political endorsements; being in bed with management; and poor communication with membership.

Participants used their keypads to prioritize the most important actions that could be taken union-wide to increase member involvement. The top actions included:

1. Communicate in a variety of ways – website, email
2. Action plans with specific member responsibilities
3. One-on-one contact
4. Engage members through activities
5. New-member orientation
6. Workplace visits
7. Market the union
8. Survey members
9. Talk about union's battles/successes

Organizing and Political Action

After lunch, we discussed what actions must be taken to increase member involvement in organizing and political action in order to ensure that AFSCME meets its goals in those areas.

Before beginning the discussion, participants watched a video about the activities of AFSCME affiliates in Wisconsin, Ohio and West Virginia to see examples of some of the things that were being done to strengthen the union's organizing and political activities.

Organizing

Promote union's image	47%
Build union-wide organizing support	42%
Offer organizing incentives	34%
Mobilize retirees	25%
Negotiate time off to work for union	23%
Follow the work	21%
Expand/mobilize VMO program	21%
Create lunch and learn sessions	20%

Political Action

Hold politicians accountable	59%
Encourage members to "vote their jobs"	51%
Focus on issues, not parties/candidates	32%
Nurture our own candidates	21%
Voting record for each candidate	20%
More candidate to member contact	18%
Year-round political action	18%
Emphasize PEOPLE program	14%
Members in endorsement process	13%

Leadership Skills

Participants discussed issues that should be addressed by the Leadership Institute: 52 percent identified communication skills. 46 percent of participants said effective negotiation and conflict resolution skills. 30 percent said the Institute should focus on creating new leaders, and 25 percent mentioned labor and AFSCME history. Other areas included managing local meetings, diversity training and organizational development. Suggested names included Leadership Institute for Tomorrow (LIFT), Leadership Education and Development (LEAD), AFSCME Leadership Academy and 21st Century Leadership Institute.

Raising the Image of Public Service

Town Meeting attendees identified several key areas for improving the image of public service. They included launching a media campaign, doing our jobs with pride, and promoting the union through community involvement. Other ideas included electing pro-public employee politicians and inviting them to experience a “day in the life of a public worker.” Some participants suggested AFSCME communicate directly to the public about the vital services that their tax dollars help to support. Finally, participants said AFSCME members should “wear green and be proud.”

Personal Commitment

The participants acknowledged that meeting the goals of the 21st Century Initiative and building real power could only happen if they made personal commitments to do something different. Participants said they would work on political campaigns, double their contribution to PEOPLE, and register other members to vote. Others said they would run for office themselves. Some said they would increase the union’s visibility in the community and the workplace. Participants also said it was important to communicate the good news from the union, remain active in the union following retirement and educate the younger generation about the importance of union activism.



“We couldn’t do the things we’ve talked about – like the Leadership Institute or more political action, if you didn’t have the courage and wisdom to enact the 21st Century Initiative.”

– AFSCME International President, Gerald W. McEntee



“I commit myself to speak to the members of my chapter on a one-on-one basis ... to inform them of what is going on with AFSCME, to motivate them to get involved.”

– Brenda Lewis, Chapter Chair, Local 2629, Indiana/Kentucky Council 62