

THE FOUNDING OF AFSCME

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, one of the largest unions in the United States, was born in Madison in the 1930s

IN the depths of the Depression, on October 16, 1936, the American Federation of Labor chartered a new international union to represent and organize state and local government workers. The union was named the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, AFL.

The fledgling union got its start in Madison, Wisconsin, just four years earlier. At that time State Federation of Labor Pres. Henry Ohl, Jr. and state personnel director Col. A. E. Garey feared that a Democratic victory in 1932 might bring efforts to weaken Wisconsin's civil service system, the third oldest in the nation.

After Governor Phil La Follette gave his blessing, Garey began signing up members. His first recruit was state personnel examiner Arnold S. Zander. Thus was born the Wisconsin Administrative, Clerical, Fiscal and Technical Employees Association. Its organizational meeting began at 4:10 P.M. on May 10, 1932. Zander was elected financial secretary. Later that month, the AFL chartered the Wisconsin union as Federal Labor Union 18213. After the International union was formed, the union became the Wisconsin State Employees Association, AFSCME Local 1.

On January 17, 1933, with just fifty members of a 1,700 potential, the new union faced the crisis its founders had feared. The Democrats had swept into power on FDR's coattails, and they indeed did plan to scrap civil service so they could offer jobs to Depression-poor party faithful. The Wisconsin union organized, lobbied, and scrapped. And it won—convincing the new administration that state civil service should continue. By June that year, the union's membership had risen to 700—an accomplishment that attracted the AFL's attention.

Zander began seeing the potential for a national union representing workers at the state and local government level. Already there were AFL affiliates representing federal workers—the American Federation of Government Employees, the National Association of Letter Carriers, and the Post Office Clerks—but no national affiliate represented state and municipal workers. Zander took on the job of convincing the AFL of the need for this new union. Over the next three years, he developed contacts with other AFL-affiliated local unions representing state and local workers. He lobbied and cajoled and prodded until the AFL recognized the need for a new national union.

On September 17, 1936, delegates representing ninety local unions in nineteen states met at Detroit's Book-Cadillac Hotel. Their dream realized, they formed AFSCME, and they elected Zander president. Pennsylvanian



State Historical Society of Wisconsin WHI (N48) 123

Wisconsin personnel director Col. A.E. Garey (left) recruited Arnold Zander (right) to form the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

David Kanes was chosen secretary-treasurer. The delegates adopted a constitution that included in its preamble the words—advanced for their time—“barring none, without regard to race, color, or creed.” Then they returned home to implement the new union's organizational priority—to grow.

It is doubtful that any of them imagined that fifty years later theirs would be the largest affiliate of the AFL-CIO.

Arnold Zander was born in Two Rivers, Wisconsin, on November 11, 1901. His father was an active socialist—naming his second son Eugene after hearing Eugene Victor Debs speak—and young Zander grew up with an appreciation of social issues. Although the Zander family was always in tight financial straits, the children were encouraged to pursue education. Arnold and Eugene took turns working and supporting each other at the University of Wisconsin.

Arnold studied city planning. He had almost finished his Ph.D. when he was offered the position of senior personnel examiner for the state. It was Depression time—and a good job—so Zander began working for the state while he finished work on his degree.

He and his wife Lola joined the Capital Club—a social club for state workers. He tried to focus some club activities on job-related issues. It was just at this time that Zander's supervisor, mentor, and life-long friend Col. A. E. Garey talked with him about forming a state workers' union. Zander was hooked; he was the first to sign up.

Four years later that local union served as the launching pad for the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, AFL—with Zander as its president.

For thirty-two years, Zander devoted his energy to organizing public employees—“public servants” they were called when he started. He led the union from “collective begging” to collective bargaining, from a membership of 9,700 in 1936 to a quarter of a million in 1964.

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