

Community Matters

Public Sector Conference Draws Delegates for U.S., Canada and Caribbean

After years of unfair employment policies at the government-operated nursing home in Illinois where she was a licensed practical nurse, Pat Shatlain threw herself into a USW organizing campaign.

"We were treated (at first) like a bunch of weak women. They tried to push us under and they almost did," Shatlain told delegates to a USW International Public Employee Conference held in Pittsburgh. But the USW "showed me how to be strong, to hang in there and win."

Shatlain had a receptive audience. The conference drew more than 100 delegates from diverse USW-represented workplaces in the United States, Canada and the Caribbean, who shared victories and struggles and learned from each other's experiences.

A better world?

"No matter the industry or the location throughout the union, the question is the same: Will I be able to leave my children a better world than I was given?" International Vice President Fred Redmond, the conference chairman, said in opening remarks. "Will I be able to save enough to send them to college or to plan for a secure retirement? Will my job even be there?"

The USW represents 25,000 public sector members. "You are an important part of the union and a growing segment of the union," International President Leo W. Gerard told the delegates. "If we are going to take on the challenges that we face in the North American labor movement, we are going to have to do it by all of us working together."

In workshops and panel discussions held over three days in May, the dele-

gates covered issues including organizing, workplace restructuring, technological change, outsourcing, privatization of government work and dispute resolution.

Card check recognition

Shatlain's story, told as part of a panel discussion on organizing, goes back to 2003 with the passage in Illinois of a card check recognition law for public employees. A majority of 150 employees at the Monroe County Nursing Home quickly signed authorization cards and the union was recognized by the state.

It should have been a happy ending right then and there, but it was instead the start of a long, painful fight for a first contract that shows why the Employee Free Choice Act and its first contract arbitration provisions are needed on a federal level.

The employer complained that the union didn't really represent the employees because there was no vote and delayed bargaining for a first contract, hoping to force a decertification.

Since public employers are susceptible to pressure, the USW began a community campaign backed by an interfaith group of clergy who spoke at public meetings and from the pulpit on behalf of employees and the union.

Reaching out for help

"We reached out to the community, to local Democrats and to other Steelworkers," Shatlain said. "We organized a campaign, held rallies and wrote letters to the editor. There was a lot of community involvement."

Staff representative Robin Rich, who helped the local committee organize, called the clergy's effort on behalf of the employees remarkable.

"They created an atmosphere of morality that was very hard for the county commissioners to get over," she said. "They became the bad guys and the clergy represented the voice of justice."

"The union went to the Illinois attorney general to force management back to the table, and even then they did not bargain in good faith," Rich said.

In the end, the USW sought an election to prove the union had support. On the eve of the vote, Shatlain

was fired. But the union won the election and went on to negotiate a successful working contract. Shatlain's firing will be the new contract's first arbitration and she expects to win.

Rights vary widely

Rights to organize vary widely in the public sector. Federal employees are covered under federal collective bargaining laws but local and state employees are not.

Some two dozen states have passed comprehensive public sector labor relations laws, extending collective bargaining to public employees at the state and local levels. Another 15 states have passed limited public sector laws that restrict the scope of bargaining or limit coverage and occupations.

Nearly 65 percent of public employees whose collective bargaining rights are guaranteed by state law are covered by agreements. But where state law protections are lacking, only 20 percent of public employees are involved in some sort of labor-management relations. These public employees have

been negotiating under local government labor relations ordinances or functioning without legal protection. Municipal workers in Texas, for example, are legally barred from collective bargaining or striking; but local labor codes can authorize dues check-offs and allow public employees to be represented by a labor organization in grievances and other matters. Public employee unions there typically depend on building major demonstrations of members and lobbying state and local representatives.

Dallas workers join

Workers for the city of Dallas joined the USW after the city in 2001 tried to cut employee wages by 10 percent to balance the budget. The USW conducted large-scale rallies around the city to let the city know it could not balance the budget on the backs of workers.

The cuts were averted. Soon afterwards, two Dallas County departments of adult and juvenile probation officers were organized based on the success in the city.

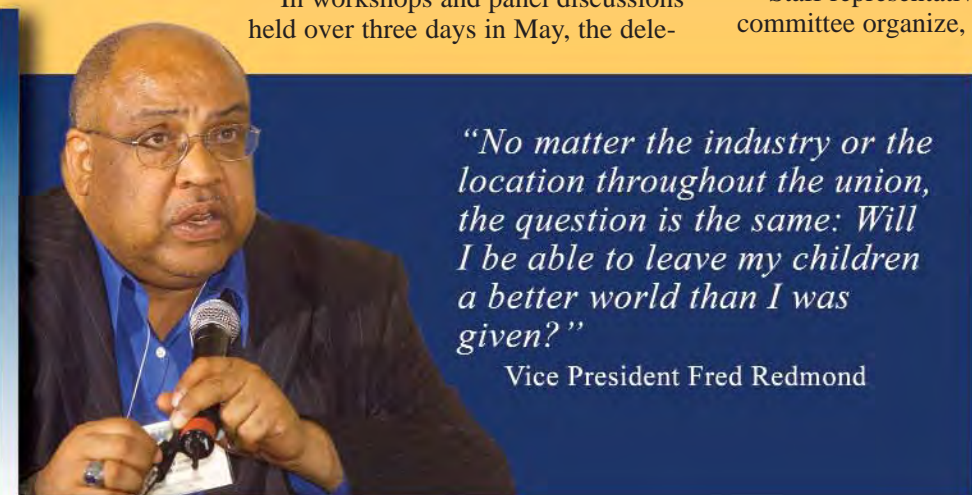
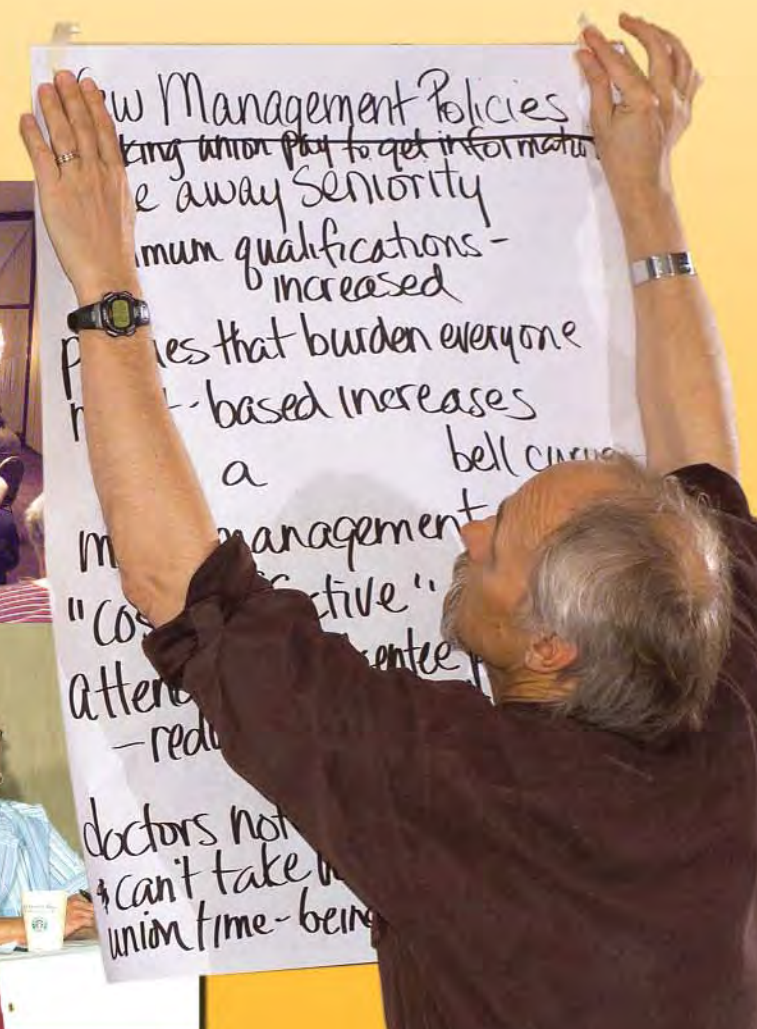
"There was no real charm or recipe. The municipalities helped us organize by treating their employees badly," said District 13 organizer Roy Robinson. "We had good committees, a good team of organizers and it all fell into place."



Right: Robin Rich and Pat Shatlain speak to the delegates.



Photos by VPI/Tom Fitzpatrick



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