Members of University of Minnesota Locals 3800 and 3937 rally outside a Regents meeting to protest the administration’s continued cuts of front-line workers and its refusal to “chop from the top.”

Mike Schaeppi, of Local 1935 in Ramsey County, is one of the legions of AFSCME members who make summer more enjoyable by keeping parks, playgrounds, pools, and picnic areas clean, safe and inviting.
We all benefit from immigration reform

There are 11 million aspiring citizens who love this country and call it home. Like immigrants before them, they came to America for freedom and for the opportunity to provide a better life for their families. These immigrants work hard. They pay their taxes and contribute to our communities. But if they are undocumented, there is no clear path for them to become citizens of the United States. Many are cut off from the economic and political freedom they came here seeking. Our broken immigration system forces them to live in the shadows. Often, low-end employers trap these workers in an underground economy that pays them next-to-nothing, exposes them to dangerous working conditions, and dodges legal responsibilities. This system lowers standards for all workers.

AFSCME members know both sides

“Undocumented workers are used and abused because there is no labor law that protects them,” says Maslah Jama, a volunteer member organizer with Council 5. He escaped civil war in Somalia and found refuge in the United States. Years later, he’s a new American who gives back to his Minneapolis community in many ways. As a member of Local 34, Maslah works with a youth support team in Hennepin County. He pledged allegiance to our country and is contributing to America’s greatness. As a refugee, Maslah’s path to citizenship was relatively fast and easy. But other AFSCME members who serve immigrant communities see firsthand where the system is broken.

Rebecca Zaremba, of Local 34, is a case management assistant for Hennepin County. She sees how a broken immigration system means broken public services and broken families. Almost every person who comes through her door is an undocumented worker. She sees whole families who need food, clothing and shelter, but she can provide public assistance only for the children who were born here. “That means a family of five could be trying to feed themselves for just $30 or $40 a month,” Rebecca says.

AFSCME members know there has to be a better way

Frontline workers like Rebecca want to help fix the immigration system. They see it’s broken when children who have gone to school in the United States their whole life cannot get into college here. They see it when boys and girls get split up from their parents, who get deported to countries that they themselves only know as children.

Maslah and Rebecca are not alone. Across the country, AFSCME has thousands of immigrants in our ranks, and thousands of non-immigrant members who serve immigrant communities. Immigration reform is about our ability as public-service workers to provide services to everyone who needs them, no matter where they were born. It’s about earned citizenship, and the opportunity for immigrants to lift themselves up through decent jobs — not underground ones.

Nationwide, 76 percent of AFSCME members recognize that our immigration system is broken.

A fair shake for immigrants means a fair shake for all workers

Immigration reform doesn’t benefit just aspiring citizens and their families. It pays off for all workers. A path to citizenship would raise wages for immigrants; that, in turn, would lift the wage floor for all workers. Cracking down on American workers by exploiting immigrant labor would add $1.5 trillion to the economy over 10 years and create more than 750,000 jobs. It would generate much-needed revenue to support public services. It would allow us to organize fellow workers, to grow our membership, and strengthen our union’s political and bargaining power.

As union members and Americans, we believe in hard work, dignity and respect. It’s time for immigration reform that reflects our shared values of fairness, opportunity, voice, and justice. It’s the right thing to do for aspiring citizens and all workers.

My grandparents came to Ellis Island in steerage. They red from Russia, Poland and Romania to escape Stalin oppression and a gulag slave camp. Two generations later, their grandson got to meet the president of the United States. That’s the American Dream. Let’s make the dream possible for more Americans.

Eliot Seide
Executive director

We need our members of Congress to pass common-sense immigration legislation that creates a roadmap to citizenship for aspiring Americans.

A fair shake for immigrants means a fair shake for all workers

We all benefit from immigration reform
For social worker, the plot keeps developing

Gary Armstead was 22 when he moved to St. Paul from Chicago’s South Side. He didn’t have a plan.

He didn’t plan on college. But that was before he graduated from the University of Minnesota. He didn’t plan on becoming a writer. But that was before his first book, “Of Father and Friends,” won an honorable mention in fiction competition at the New York Book Festival.

“On the personal level, I wasn’t achieving anything,” he says of why he started a new life in a new town. Chicago, he says, “was a turbulent environment. I needed to separate myself from where I was.” Moving to the Twin Cities, it turns out, “provided the space I needed to develop.”

Armstead is a Hennepin County social worker in Local 34. He works in child protection services, with children in foster care. Armstead isn’t planning on giving up his day job. But that doesn’t stop him from staying up way too late, writing.

“I get home from work sometimes and sit at the kitchen table till 2 or 3 in the morning. I’m very passionate about this. I want to get into the writing. Doesn’t stop him from staying up way too late, writing.

Grounded in day-to-day events

The latest evidence is “Flashover,” his third crime novel for North Star Press. The book, due out Sept. 1, riffs off a comment a court psychologist made about how arsonists are not “typical” sociopaths.

In his crime series, Nelson takes contemporary events and spins them in a “what if” direction. His style nestles between the mystery and thriller genres, he says.

In his first book, “Reprisal,” Nelson speculated what would happen if an international terrorist ring – including participants in Minnesota – were part of a plot to create a global smallpox pandemic. His second book, “Fallout,” projected how far aggressive terrorists might go to bring about the end days promised in the Book of Revelation.

In his text, Nelson specializes in bringing out the give-and-take between lawyers, defendants, and judges – the personal quirks, motivations, maneuvers, and antics that play out in chambers, private offices, cells, and hallways.

If the foundation for Nelson’s plots isn’t real enough for you, he makes sure he grounds his stories in everyday neighborhoods, restaurants, or other settings in Minnesota – places you actually can visit.

Seeing things from both sides

The changing demographics of Minnesota influenced how Nelson settled upon his protagonist, Zehra Hassan. She is a public defender turned prosecutor. “I thought it would be fascinating to explore what it’s like to be a progressive Muslim woman in a Judeo-Christian nation,” Nelson says. That helps him build the theme of tolerance into all his books – an attitude, he says, “I feel very strongly about.”

Though Hassan switches from being a public defender to being a prosecutor – in part for better career opportunities – Nelson personally says he’s happy on the public defender side. “In the day-to-day working environment, you get much more freedom. The county attorney is much more top-heavy, managerial.”

He admits, however, that being a public defender is rarely an easy job. For one, he says, “I was really lucky,” he says. “I feared and respected my grandmother enough that I was less interested with the elements of street life. “But when you’re living in survival mode, common sense often takes a back seat. You’re alive, but not really living. You’re scraping for what little resources there are. You don’t have time to prioritize, to think about tomorrow.

Themes like those, and deciding which choices and opportunities to pursue or avoid, weave through Armstead's books. “Soul Music Records” – his latest – is no different. On the surface, it’s about two brothers who inherit their father’s record store. They disagree on whether to sell it. Around that plot, Armstead explores identity, legacy, race, community, and the true meanings of family and success. Power, money, religion, trust, and deception spice it up more.

And let's not forget the music. The story is filled with references – from James Brown to Al Green, from Prince to Amy Winehouse – that make you wish the book came with a soundtrack. Classic soul musicians were doing more than singing,” Armstead says. “It was music with ideas behind it. It spoke to the times. It sparked awareness.”

Income inequality: It’s personal

The Economic Policy Institute has launched “Inequality is.” The highly interactive website uses animation, charts you can understand, and information you can customize to your personal situation. It’s all designed to help you see how rising income inequality affects ordinary Americans.

The site illustrates how inequality was created, and proposes steps we can take to fix it – including improving labor standards, putting more people back to work, and ensuring that trade agreements respect workers’ rights.

Click on “Inequality is” to find it. www.inequality.is

Economic recovery – for whom?

After the recession, CEO salaries kept climbing. Incomes for ordinary people did not.

See www.epi.org
Go outside and play

AFSCME members make it possible to enjoy your local parks, playgrounds, pools, and picnic pavilions

When the national Trust for Public Land ranked Minneapolis and St. Paul as the best big-city park systems in the nation, it wasn’t a shock to Susan Schmidt, the group’s state director. “It speaks to the deep values of the Twin Cities and Minnesota, that parks play such a role,” she says.

Whether in a community large or small, it’s an often-overlooked force of public workers who keep the Twin Cities’ parks, playgrounds, pools, and picnic areas clean, safe and inviting. From planning to programming to mowing, they’re most likely AFSCME.

Charlie Davis, of Local 224 in Shorewood, has been making a day at the park possible for decades. In addition to public works duties, his primary role is overseeing the city’s beach and five parks. In summer, that means picking up trash; whacking weeds; tilling the community garden; mowing soccer fields, ball fields, and open space; maintaining picnic pavilions and playground equipment; and dragging the infelds of softball diamonds every afternoon. After 29 years, he says: “I just go out there and do it every day. It’s routine.”

Routine or not, it’s a lot of work, says Gary Koesling, of Ramsey County Parks Local 1935. “I don’t think people realize the total magnitude of what it takes just to keep one of these going and make it nice. They don’t see it. It’s behind the scenes, or it’s done by the time they get here.”

Wash, rinse and repeat

Ramsey County is a premier example of the region’s commitment to parks. It is the state’s smallest county geographically, but has the state’s largest county park system, says Steve Reeves, treasurer of Local 1935. His local’s members maintain Ramsey’s nine county parks, six regional parks, 23 miles of trails – and all the facilities that go with them. That includes beaches, a water park, picnic pavilions, a nature center, five golf courses, dog parks, fishing piers, and 11 ice arenas.

Reeves and Eric Jones are among staff who care for Keller Regional Park, one of the county’s busiest. Five days a week, their crews cut grass, clear trash, clean bathrooms, and clean picnic shelters. Other crews are dedicated exclusively to hectic weekend duty.

What impresses Susan Schmidt, Minnesota director of the Trust for Public Land, is how people in the Twin Cities continue to invest in parks – new and old. Access is key to why the Trust rated the twin Cities’ park systems as the nation’s best.

Beyond recreation, parks contribute to personal, community, and environmental health, Schmidt says. “They add beauty. And they lead to the social interaction, personal, and business activities that keep neighborhoods alive. “Parks can lead to a lot of good stuff,” she says.

Charlie Davis at a soggy Manor Park in Shorewood.

Charlie Davis
Local 224, Shorewood

Mike Endres at the splash pad in Kelley Park in Apple Valley.

Mike Endres
Local 479, Apple Valley

Endres is a project crew foreman. He oversees upkeep, maintenance, and repairs on most of the buildings, water attractions, plumbing, and other infrastructure in the suburb’s more than 50 parks.

“What we are paid to do is make it possible for people to enjoy our parks,” he says. “Studies have proven that when people recreate, they’re much happier, they’re more settled, they’re more stable.”

Endres oversees a staff of six, which doubles with seasonal help in the summer. “I call us the ADD crew,” he says, because they rarely get to stay on one task for long. “We’ve always got an emergency somewhere else.”

Prioritizing projects can be a challenge, he says, especially when members of the public wonder why something at their neighborhood park isn’t being taken care of right away. “At times, it can be overwhelming,” Endres says. “But I love the variety of it. I love the freedom of it. And being outdoors is always great.”

Parks thrive on commitment from top to bottom

The foundation of a robust park system in the seven-county metro is a 1974 state law that puts the Metropolitan Council in charge of preserving open space and developing regional parks.

Within that framework, cities and counties run individual or cooperative park systems. They maintain ball fields of every stripe; basketball, volleyball, tennis, and horseshoe courts; and rec centers, playgrounds, pools, disc golf courses, band shells, gardens, and more.

“The beauty of working for parks is that recreation can take so many different forms,” says Mary Livingstone, of Local 1842 in St. Paul.

The Metropolitan Council partners with 10 local units of government to support more than 50 regional parks and park reserves, with 54,842 acres open to the public, and 308 miles of trails. That total acreage could hold the entire City of Minneapolis. The trail system is the equivalent of traveling from Rochester to Moorhead. But it gets better: The Met Council expects trail mileage to triple by 2030, and parkland to expand to 70,000 acres.

Eric Jones, of Local 1935, cleans out grills at a picnic pavilion in Keller Regional Park. Below: Allan Huelsman, also of Local 1935, power washes picnic tables in a Keller pavilion.

Local 1935’s Gary Koesling replaces the floats on a boat pier at Lake Johanna. “I have to be outside,” he says. “I could never work in a cubicle.”
We appreciate it. It's nice to get that.

Getting picnic shelters spiffed up in time for events is a priority. "When people show up at 11 o'clock for their big picnic or wedding or class reunion, everything's ready to rock," Reeves says. "They don't know that the guy that did it was there at 5:30 in the morning."

Going to the dogs – in a good way

While Jones and his crews take care of daily chores, members like Koesling perform the support maintenance that keeps the parks and trails in repair. "It's a little bit of everything," Koesling says. His crew is on call throughout the county – sometimes rushing from one site to another several times a day.

"We'll mount benches, picnic tables, take down trees that need to come down. There's buildings. There's storm damage. One day we might be working on a boat pier; the next day we'll be roughing out a trail, or landscaping, or putting in a culvert, or clearing out a culvert that's clogged, or out repairing something. It's a whole mish-mash."

The county's parks have many more facilities and features than when Koesling started working 34 years ago. From its perspective, trails and cing the big dogs.

But people love their dog parks. They're very, very busy – but they're very high-maintenance. We're constantly hauling wood chips to them. Lots of maintenance on fences. A lot of fixing gates.

Sticking up for each other

Regardless of their duties, Ramsey County crews say their co-workers make the days go quicker.

"The crews are pretty tight," Koesling says. "It makes it fun."

"We really take care of each other," Reeves says. "We're not always working on the fun stuff. But if you're with the right group – which this whole local is the right group – that work can really turn around in a hurry. If you can enjoy your day when you're cleaning toilets and picking up other people's garbage, that says a lot right there."

Reeves says his crews also get to enjoy something not all public workers get – positive feedback. After all, many people who use the parks are there for a celebration, he says. "They're having a baby shower, or an anniversary party. So people – not always, but generally – have a smile. And more often than not, somebody will come by and say, 'Thanks for taking care of the park. We notice.' We appreciate it. It's nice to get that."

Brian Hoffman and Mark Newton
Local 1935, Keller Golf Course

Many park workers can tell you how unusual this spring was – the late arrival, the persistent rains, the damaging storms. But few face the kind of upheaval Hoffman and Newton are dealing with this season.

They're grounds keepers for Keller Golf Course, a public course that Ramsey County operates in Maplewood. This year, the 84-year-old course is being rebuilt. Under construction are a new clubhouse, tee boxes, green, bunkers, ponds, irrigation, and more.

Hoffman and Newton are thrilled with the upgrades on what long has been considered one of the nation's best public courses. Keller "was beat up," Hoffman says. "Everything was just so worn out."

Keeping a golf course up to par is far different from routine park maintenance, they say. Turf growth is crucial. That makes watering, mowing, weed and pest prevention more intense. "You have to pay attention to more details," Hoffman says. "Keeping your eyes open and noticing little things. Getting on top of it before it spreads into worse things."

That covers everything from spotting weeds and fungus to relocating pins and cart routes to prevent turf from becoming trampled beyond repair.

Colleen Tusa leads a Fitness Fun aerobics class in St. Paul.

Tusa has worked in St. Paul's adaptive recreation program for 30 years. The program provides wide-ranging recreational options for children and adults with mental or physical handicaps. Activities include a constantly changing set of aerobic and dance classes; walking, running, swimming and weight workouts; and team sports for just about every season, including softball, basketball, soccer, kickball, floor hockey, volleyball, and bowling. "We use as many of the facilities as we can around the city," Tusa says. "We're just trying to be accepted."

Tusa got the job after getting her degree in therapeutic recreation. "Unfortunately, many people see people's disabilities," she says. "I focus on their abilities. That's my number one. They want the same things out of activities and exercise and socialization as anybody else. They want to make friends, they want to feel good about themselves, they want to get out of the house. We just have a great time."

Mary Livingston conducts a rehearsal of the Golden Melody Makers.

Livingston directs the Golden Melody Makers senior chorus. She was accompanist when the group launched in 1981, then moved up when the previous director retired. "My training is in music education, so it's fun to be able to use that in my regular job. It's a bonus all the way around."

Livingston leads roughly two dozen singers who meet weekly. The oldest is 92. "The music for me – and I think for most people – has a revitalizing characteristic to it," she says. "Singing is a healthy activity. You use your lungs, use your brain. It's a challenge sometimes, but that's good for people."

Bonnie Hoffman (left) and Mark Newton on one of the fairways under renovation at Keller Golf Course.

"We're on a watering schedule," Newton says. "Every day, about 3 in the morning, we start the sprinklers. That's a big timing issue."

There's also a rigid mowing routine, with as many as eight mowers going to keep the fairways, greens, and rough up to standards. The hours and hazards are different on a golf course, too. "During summer, we start as soon as the sun comes up," Hoffman says. "It's a big timing issue."

"I think the first tee time is 6/18," Newton says. "We have to do our best to stay ahead of the golfers."

"Weekends, it's pretty hectic," Hoffman says. "You've got to keep your head up. You've got to be golf opponent, not get in their way, not run their golf balls over."

In case you're wondering, neither is an avid golfer. "I play about four times a year," Newton says. "I don't take it too seriously."
Longtime labor lawyer Gregg Corwin makes sure public employees get the respect and rights we deserve

There’s a saying,” Gregg Corwin says, “If you’re really doing your job, nobody knows you’re doing it. It’s only when you screw up that they notice.”

Most public employees get that. We’re often out of sight. We do work that few people see, few people understand, and even fewer people give us credit. In that way, Corwin and AFSCME members have a lot in common.

As the longtime attorney for AFSCME in Minnesota, Corwin has fought some of the biggest public employee battles in state history. And of the smallest. He’s done most of it behind the scenes. And he’s OK with that.

“Most of what I do, members don’t see. The settlements we work out, the administrative hearings we have, the arbitrations that we do – a lot of times, they don’t see all that. They don’t see the legislation that we work on. But if we’re doing our job right, they never should see it. All they see is that they’re being protected and that we have their back. So that’s my job: I have the union’s back.”

Changing things for the better

In his career, Corwin has done more than watch workers’ backs. He’s helped turn Minnesota’s public-sector labor law into what it is today.

He’s argued cases – all the way to the state Supreme Court, when necessary – that led to key rulings defining pension benefits, arbitration rights, fair-share dues arrangements, and contract protections for seasonal employees.

Corwin helped shape the legislation that extended and protected public employees’ bargaining rights, including the right to strike.

He seeks justice for workers who get screwed, he says. He saves workers’ jobs and, in some cases, he believes he saves more than that.

“We all get upset about bad things that happen, and we want to see things better. But most of us can’t do anything about it. I can actually do something about some of this stuff. My career has helped me do something about it.”

Gregg Corwin discusses strategy to defend union rights for family child-care providers.

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Gregg Corwin: “I can’t tell you the thrills that I’ve been given changing somebody’s life.”

“I’ve been given the opportunity to protect people and their jobs when unfairness occurs, or worse. We make people’s lives better. It’s been a gift, you know?”

In the beginning

In some ways, it’s no accident Corwin became a premier public-sector labor lawyer. “My family were all liberals,” he says, “so there was no question about what side I was going to be on.”

But Corwin was also at the right place at the right time. PELRA – the state’s Public Employee Labor Relations Act – became law in 1971.

When Corwin graduated from the University of Minnesota Law School in 1972, there were no experts in the field. So he became one – by

It’s more than a job – it’s a life’s mission

Expanding the rights, power, and dignity of workers has been the constant goal of Gregg Corwin’s career. “The difference between what we do as labor lawyers and what the other side does is, we really believe that what we are doing is a cause. None of us are in it for the money; we make a lot more if we were on the other side. But we all passionately believe in what we do. It’s ideological. It’s an emotional calling.”

One of his first victories, Corwin recalls, was a court ruling that reinstated a worker in the state’s Department of Human Rights. Corwin was able to personally walk the worker back to his desk.

Corwin talks with great emotion about a sexual harassment case he handled in western Minnesota – a case in which the perpetrator ultimately was prosecuted criminally. “No one believed them,” he says of the women he represented. “I’ve seen governors run away from us.

“when i go into court, they’re on an equal basis. and when they’re represented by us, they’re on an equal basis. And when i go into court, they’re on an equal basis.

and where else can an individual get that? Where else can they the get power to do that? Where else can somebody get justice from a situation where, on their own, they are powerless? No

Challenges never end

Of course, not every fight ends in victory. “You can get down,” Corwin says. “Bad things happen. The hardest thing is when you can’t right a wrong.”

The last few years have not been easy. Right-wing groups and legislators have worked endlessly to denigrate public workers and break their unions. But Corwin takes a different perspective.

“The more successful we are, the bigger the target we are,” he says. “Our success has brought on these attacks. If we weren’t successful and weren’t perceived as being dangerous to their point of view, none of this would have happened.

“You have to remember that, when i started in the business, unions weren’t very powerful in the public sector. So, to me, as bad as things are now, they were a lot worse in 1973. So, i’ve seen progress. And we’re stronger now than we were ever back then. And we could never have dreamed we’d be this strong back in ‘73.

“So i look at this as the price of success. And because we’re so successful, they’re so vehemently opposed to us, and want to destroy us. But all that’s going to do is make us stronger.”
chance at first, then by choice. It happened this way. One of Corwin’s law school classmates, Mike Sieben, was attorney for the Minnesota State Employees Union, which was the predecessor to AFSCME Council 6. After Sieben got elected to the Legislature, it would have been a conflict of interest for him to keep the union as a client. So Corwin picked up some of Sieben’s caseload, including litigation that ultimately upheld the constitutionality of fair-share requirements.

From there, Corwin says, his work for labor unions mushroomed. After picking up Council 6, he added Council 65, then the old Council 91.

Making the law work
Nationally prominent labor attorneys, including Janet Cohen and Abe Zwerdling, helped mentor him in the early days. In time, Corwin gained that same kind of national prominence.

He became a founding member of the national AFL-CIO’s Lawyers Coordinating Committee. He is co-chair of the American Bar Association’s national conference on labor employment law – elected by 25,000 lawyers from the management, government, and union sides of the equation. He co-chairs the state bar’s labor and employment law conferences. His peers gave him a rare honor by naming him a fellow in the College of Labor and Employment Lawyers.

Public-sector labor law was constantly under challenge in its early years. “We had a lot of fundamental litigation,” Corwin says. “Through litigation, we established the case law, because there was none. And so I helped make the law.”

As court rulings evolved, AFSCME and Corwin worked to get those legal victories cemented into state law. “I spent a lot of time with the Legislature in the early days, in effect, rewriting PELRA and proposing legislation. Mike Sieben used to joke about this, that if I ever lost in court, I’d never lose – because we’d just go change the law.”

Those fights haven’t ended. Corwin is now helping fight off right-wing lawsuits that attempt to deny family child-care providers the collective-bargaining rights they just won at the Legislature. He is also fighting attempts by Bloomington to overturn 40 years of legal precedent and block the city’s parks workers from joining AFSCME.

Different roles as needed
In Minnesota, Corwin now represents more than a dozen unions. They range in size from AFSCME Council 5 and MAPE – which claim about 55,000 members combined – to unions with only a few dozen members. “Actually, it’s harder to represent those smaller unions,” he says. “It’s a different role. In a small union, I’m their business agent as well as their lawyer. I’m their negotiator. I do everything. I’m their staff. In a large union, I’m support. In fact, that’s really my job at AFSCME.”

Then Corwin laughs at an irony: He protects other workers. But, as an outside attorney, he has no guarantees about his own job. “I am,” he notes, “the ultimate at-will employee.”

Putting labor to work
In AFSCME, Hartel is a Next Wave activist and a steward in his local 221’s Mike Hartel has unions in his blood. But until recently, that same kind of national prominence. His father and grandfather were Steel Workers, so he knew the benefits of a union contract. “But I’ve worked in places that aren’t organized, that didn’t have those benefits, that didn’t have insurance,” he says. “I know how incredibly stressful it can be to try to go out and work sick, or miss out on pay.”

So he expressed that gratitude publicly. He posted his story on Facebook, letting others know how being in a union made a difference for him. “Part of it is general gratitude. But some of it is just awareness of what can happen if we stand together.”

“I’m the beneficiary of people who fought for those negotiated benefits provide,” Hartel says.

THE UNION RUNS DEEP
Local 221’s Mike Hartel has unions in his blood. But until recently, even he didn’t realize how much.

In AFSCME, Hartel is a Next Wave activist and a steward in his MnDOT local. He was elected to Council 5’s Executive Board last fall. His father is active in Gas Workers Local 340, which is part of the union pipe trades. His grandfather was in the same local. His mother works for the phone company, where she is a member of the Communication Workers; her father was a union lineman at the phone company, where he belonged to IBEW.

But Hartel now knows his union roots are even deeper. When helping to move his grandfather, he found an old dues book. Turns out the book belonged to his great-grandfather, who was a member in good standing of the Upholsterers union. That union was one of the first to take on the deceptively named Citizens Alliance. Years later, the famous 1934 Teamsters strike squeezed the last breath out of the Alliance, which was an anti-union cabal run by Minneapolis businesses. “It shows how far back my family went in labor unions,” Hartel says.

NOT TAKING IT FOR GRANTED
At a basement desk on the Iron Range, Jacob Litter knows exactly who helped him. It was his union and all the workers through the years “who stood up for themselves.”

Litter, a member of Local 66, works for a St. Louis County mental health treatment program. He started last August, so was on the job only four months when winter rolled around and he got sick. Even though he was still on probation, he was able to piece together enough holidays, comp time, sick leave, and personal leave to stay home for more than a week and mend, as his doctor recommended. He didn’t lose any pay and, because he has health insurance, could afford the treatment he needed.

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Jacob Litter, back at his desk in Virginia.
Locals hold University accountable

The Wall Street Journal picked the University of Minnesota as its national poster child for management bloat on campus. The Minnesota Legislature is withholding millions of dollars unless the university cuts its administrative ranks. But activists in AFSCME Locals 3800 and 3937—who have been highlighting the administration’s misplaced priorities for years—say the U’s administrators still don’t get it. So union members keep investigating and publicizing staffing patterns. They keep showing up at Regents meetings, refusing to go away until the problem goes away.

They keep challenging Regents and administrators with a different vision—one that puts education and the university’s land-grant mission of teaching, research and community involvement first.

Chopping from the wrong end

It’s not rhetoric. In the past five years, the university added 121 managers. At the same time, it eliminated 753 front-line staff jobs and 44 full-time professors. The new management ranks include 30 finance directors, 18 senior finance managers, 16 communications managers, 15 communications directors, and 12 more human resources consultants. The average salary-and-benefit package in these jobs exceeds $110,000.

AFSCME argues that the university cannot afford to add so many positions that have no direct link to the classroom. But while the university continued bulging at the top, it wiped out nearly 10 percent of its clerical positions, doubled staff workloads in some cases, and suffocated wages, the local says.

“Clerical, technical, health-care, maintenance, and food-service workers have paid the price for a system that has created wealth for a few and poverty for thousands of workers,” Cherrene Horazuk, Local 3800 president, told university Regents at an open forum in June.

Meanwhile, student tuition doubled. Student debt soared to more than bloat in management. Bloat has gone hand in hand with excessive salaries in top administrative and athletic jobs, and with lavish retirement or buyout packages in others, they say.

Workers who lost jobs include directory assistance operators, and technicians who install and maintain campus communication networks. About half the layoffs are in AFSCME bargaining units.

“If you have a phone on your desk, you need them,” says Barb Bezat, president of Local 3937. “We all have LANs or wireless at work. We’ve all got computers.”

Operators routinely helped visitors find their way around the maze of streets, tunnels, and construction on campus, find parking, and get to their building. Dan Peterson, a laid-off operator from Local 3800, spent his own time, after hours, driving around to keep up on the best routes into and around campus.

“GPS systems don’t work really well around here,” Peterson says. “The one thing I can do, that technology can’t do, is care.”

“We are losing out on the human touch,” Horazuk says, “the people who take the time to troubleshoot, to help, to direct, to listen, to field complaints.”

“The university needs people,” Bezat says. “We need them.”