



ACE Newsletter

Wisconsin Civil Service Turns 119

June 2024

Wisconsin celebrated the 119th anniversary of Civil Service on June 17, 2024. The Coalition to Save Civil Service celebrated the date with a rally at the State Street entrance to the Capitol. The Association of Career Employees wrote a letter to the editor to the Wisconsin State Journal.

This letter, which appeared in the print and electronic versions of the Wisconsin State Journal on Sunday, June 16, 2024, is below:

Civil Service is Essential to good state Government

As a retired state employee, I know that “civil service” may seem like an ambiguous term, but it has a long history of assuring that our government is based on merit, equal treatment and service in the public interest.

Civil servants are government employees who work in occupations that are neither political, judicial nor military. Civil service assures that the most competent employees are serving the public, free of political or corrupt pressure. It is an indispensable component of democracy.

Wisconsin will celebrate the 119th anniversary of state civil service on Monday. In 2023, the Department of Administration reported that about 28,000 employees were in the executive branch of state government who have full civil service protection and thousands of vacancies were waiting to be filled.

These employees receive civil service protection in both their hiring and subsequent careers with the state. Not included in these numbers are Universities of Wisconsin employees, legislative and judiciary officials and staff, and a large number of limited-term employees.

Sally Drew, Madison, President, Association of Career Employees

Event Speakers

Three active state employees spoke at the rally. Quotations from their longer speeches are below and reflect their personal experiences and opinions.

Barbara Smith, Department of Administration, President of the WI Professional Employees Council(WPEC), AFT 4848 described how civil service provisions were weakened by Act 10 in 2010 which disbanded unions and Act 150 in 2016.

She said “Today we are calling for ACTION to strengthen Civil Service, a key building block of any democracy. We want a reversal of Act 10! Also, we call for a

reversal of 2016's Act 150. That law eliminated the requirement for Civil Service exams and created many obstacles to excellence among state workers. It created roadblocks to a career, and instituted long probations and other "boobytraps" to keep state workers off balance, cowed, and submissive. In 2015 & 2016, we formed the Wisconsin Coalition to Save Civil Service to hold accountable those who are attacking Civil Service."

Ben Gruber, Department of Natural Resources, President of AFSCME Local 1215 and represents the Conservation Wardens and Forest Rangers of the DNR. He described his first-hand struggles to retain civil service rights as his agency worked to deny them.

He said, "It's one thing to look at graphs that tell of an increase in discipline or firings. It could be troubling to read about how centralization of Human Resources could negatively affect workers. It might be difficult to suggest that discrimination and favoritism could be part of public employee promotions. It is very different to experience those things firsthand. I'm here to share experiences with you. I'm one of those stories. In 2020, after reporting some very troubling behavior in which a credentialed DNR Warden, repeatedly disparaged females, mocked those with developmental delays and suggested lynching protesters, I was fired for "wearing the wrong patches on my uniform". When I got an attorney and threatened a lawsuit, I was quickly reinstated. Since then, I've learned a lot about how the government does business since Act 150 in 2015 and Act 10 in 2010. I learned that I was just one of many with similar stories. I learned that when the state has to pay out a settlement for discrimination or retaliation or illegal terminations, they coerce the victim into signing an non-disclosure agreement. We call this the "hush money and the gag order". This ensures that those responsible are NOT held accountable and can continue without consequence."

Joanna Frasch, Department of Workforce Development, AFSCME Local 1 At-Large Board Member

The civil service system is a pillar of democracy, and it is being threatened here and at the federal level. Trump and other extremists have outlined its removal in their “Project 2025” outline. They plan to dismantle the civil service system at the federal level and replace all career workers with their allies. This is literally written in their playbook. I fear if this were to happen, state systems would fall like dominoes shortly after. We can’t allow this to happen. Recent attacks on civil service are sold to the public via short-sighted objectives, like making it easier to fire public employees – calling: “You’re fired!” and “Drain the swamp!” when the betterment of public services is far from their minds. In reality, if that were to happen, it would cause severe delays in service to the public – complete chaos actually. I’m imagining a person showing up to the DMV a few days after an inauguration, the place is packed, and they hear, “Take a number and come back in a few months after we train everyone, we drain the swamp, and someone can operate the camera!” Seriously, the inefficiencies would be mind-blowing, and a lot of good people would lose their jobs for no good reason. The truth is, outrageous misconduct by public employees is rare, and the tools needed to address it already exist. There’s no need to dismantle the entire civil service system.

The Coalition to Save Civil Service

The Coalition to Save Civil Service includes the South Central Federation of Labor, AFSCME Council 32, American Federation of Teachers-Wisconsin (AFT-W), the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, the Association of Career Employees (ACE), Blue Jean Nation, AFT-W State Employee Council, Wisconsin

Professional Employee Association, POWRS, NAACP-Dane County, Progressive
Dane, AFSCME Locals 171 and 1, and AFSCME Retirees Subchapter 52.

If you found this information helpful, please forward to a friend and ask them to consider joining ACE.
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