A historical perspective of the Pennsylvania Social Services Union, Local 668, SEIU

Public Employee Union’s go back a long way – Postal Workers from the 1880’s and AFSCME from the 1930’s.

SEIU began organizing public service workers after World War II even though it was illegal in most States including Pennsylvania.

Unlike the National Labor Relations Act the governed over private sector unions, each State governed over Public Workers and they could not exercise a right to bargain or strike.

In 1956, SEIU Local 406 covering Welfare workers and Local 358 covering Employment Security workers was born. During the years leading up to this there were 50 SEIU unions in Pennsylvania covering various shops and work. Remember, there was no legal right to form a union or negotiate a contract so many of these organizations were in name only and may have met with managers to improve working conditions.

By 1967 the number fell to 19 because wages were brought up under Governor William Scranton in response to agitation to the demand for a new classification system.

The time period between 1968 and 1970 was one of social activism spawned by the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movement. Workers protested unfair conditions in numerous venues. During this time period, one of our early members Louise Koff and 3 other women ran off flyers and protested the addition of adding food stamps to the normal welfare worker caseload.

During the time period leading up to the passage of Act 195, especially during the Social Activism period of the late 60’s workers walking out to protest working conditions and unsafe work areas were fairly frequent. During those times, both management and workers often participated together.

The PA AFL-CIO with approximately 16 of their private sector union affiliates worked for and passed the Public Employee Relations Act, ACT 195 in 1970. The new law provided that public workers could organize unions.

After two years of organizing PSSU was certified by the Labor Board, January 14, 1972.

Certification was not the end for the members but, the beginning. The members still had to organize and grow the union, establish the union rules or Constitution and negotiate the first and subsequent contracts. Not an easy task.

Membership during those early years was only a few thousand Social and Rehabilitative Services workers, mostly made up of Welfare. Getting people to agree was a monumental task. Nevertheless, activists persisted in organizing State workers and also County Workers. Dauphin
County was one of the first of the County bargaining units (CYS and MH/MR) followed by Counties surrounding Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. For many years, PSSU remained at about 10,000 members.

It was not until 1988 with the passage of the FAIR SHARE ACT, Act 15 that the union started growing larger. That same year saw the merger of Pennsylvania Employment Security Employees Association, Local 675 into PSSU.

The improvement of public worker's wages and benefits occurred primarily due to several State Worker Strikes that occurred during the 1980's with the last Strike in 1988. When the union first certified, the average caseworker salary was $5,300.00 with no real benefits. Paid vacation, sick time, holidays and hospitalization was gradually added by the workers fighting for them in contracts. Management opposed even the most minor of improvements. Members fought for everything we have. The starting salary for a state welfare caseworker today is $40,039.00.

Union members have always run their union. The early years saw two structures of union management determined by the Union Constitution, voted on by the membership. The original representational structure of the union was by the six welfare regions, two BVS regions and one PHRC region. They elected a Statewide Executive Board. A second Constitutional convention in the mid-seventies established the structure to be strictly 8 geographic Chapter regions of Pennsylvania with SWEB members elected by the Chapter. This structure continued until 1994.

In 1994, PSSU was placed under an Administrative Trusteeship by the International Union which lasted until 1997 at which time the union Constitutional structure changed to include all the various types of work done by our members and expanded the SWEB to elect members not only from the established 14 Chapter Regional but from the agencies and type of work done by our members. This structure exists today.

NOTE: No short history of the Union can possibly cover the 40 years that PSSU has been in existence nor include all the sacrifice and personal hardship endured by our members to force a better work life from their employers. Our union is rich in the history of promoting social justice. Our members organized then and today, not only to achieve better working conditions for themselves but, to speak out on behalf of the people they serve as well.

The pendulum swings back and forth on the fights we have with the Employers and the benefits we achieve for ourselves and our families but, what is crystal clear is that our members determine what they fight for and how their union is managed, through one of the most democratic processes available in the modern American Labor Movement.

Please go our union's web site, www.seiu668.org for additional information and training.