

Good afternoon. I'm MaryBe McMillan with the NC AFL-CIO. I'm going to talk about older workers who are union members, how the labor movement tries to protect older workers, and how seniors continue to be active participants in our state's labor movement.

Who are union members

Some of you might be thinking, what labor movement? NC is one of the least unionized states in the country.

Or maybe you're thinking, Unions—why would I be interested in them? Believe me. I know the stereotypes and the anti-union sentiment that exist in this state. I grew up in Hickory, and my own family had a negative view of unions. Corruption, the mafia, people threatening to break your knee caps—I've heard it all.

That's why I always welcome the opportunity to speak to non-union audiences and educate folks about the labor movement in NC and what we're all about. And I hope that after I talk, people come away with a greater respect of the labor movement and all that we have done to benefit not just union workers, but all workers.

So let me take just a few minutes before I talk specifically about seniors to explain who union members are in NC. I think part of the reason there are such stereotypes is that people in NC think union members are somehow foreign and different. People think there aren't many union members around and those who do belong to a union are from NY and not like me. Well, you might not realize it but you interact with union members every day.

A member of the National Association of Letter Carriers delivers your mail. If you go into a post office to buy stamps, the clerk is a member of the Amer. Postal Workers Union. If UPS delivers a package to you, that delivery person is a member of the Teamsters.

If you use AT&T for your telephone services, the operators and repair people are members of the Communication Workers of America.

The drivers of public buses in the Asheville, Wilmington, and here in the Triangle are members of the Amalgamated Transit Union. If you ride the train, many of the engineering and maintenance staff are members of the

United Transportation Union. If you travel by airplane, the pilots, attendants, mechanics, and service agents are represented by a variety of unions.

If your child goes to a public school, they may be taught by, fed by, and driven by union members. In fact, the yellow school buses are built by members of the United Auto Workers at Thomas Bus in High Point.

The staff at the local social security office or the VA hospital may be members of the American Federation of Government Employees.

If you go see a professional sporting event, like the Carolina Panthers, or hear professional musicians like the NC Symphony, you are being entertained by union members.

In many cities including Raleigh, the police officers and fire fighters who protect you belong to a union.

And now many state employees like some of you in this room are the newest union members in a state as a member of State Employees Association of NC now Service Employees International Union Local 2008.

Even in NC, one of the least unionized states in the country, there are union members all around you. They are young and they are older workers. Union members are professional office staff and they are manufacturing workers. They are your coworkers and your neighbors; they are members of your church; they are people just like you who want to build a better life for their families.

The benefits of unions

People join unions because there is a real advantage to union membership, especially for older workers as I'll explain in a minute. Workers join a union because they recognize that there is strength in numbers and that through a collective voice, they are more likely to get management to address working conditions and other issues on the job. Let's face it—management can easily dismiss one worker who complains about working conditions, but if hundreds of workers demand change, then management is more likely to make changes.

Because of that collective strength, there are definite benefits to being a union member. A union card is the best anti-poverty program around. Union

workers earn 30% on average more than non union workers. They are 300% more likely to have defined benefit pensions, 63% more likely to have employer provided health insurance and 28% more likely to have a paid vacation. Plus they have clearly defined promotion schedules, grievance procedures, and most of them have a voice at work. They get all this for union dues that generally average 2% of a worker's monthly salary.

The Union Advantage for Older Workers

Being a union member has real advantages for older workers. An essential component of any union contract is seniority. Under a union contract, the longer you've worked at the company, the more you'll be rewarded. You're first in line to move up and you're last in line to be laid off.

Nowadays, the opposite is true for many non-union workers who are seniors. Too often, they find themselves passed over for promotions and the first pushed out the door in an economic downturn.

In fact, I just returned from Texas visiting my husband's relatives. And my husband's uncle told us about his experience working for Bell Helicopter in Fort Worth, Texas. After working there for 25 years, they let him go and told him that he could be rehired in the same entry-level position he started in so many years ago at 40% of his current salary. That's what he did because he needed to work 5 more years to collect his retirement.

Unfortunately, you hear a lot of stories like that. As companies try to cut costs, senior salaries and benefits are some of the first to go.

These tough economic times mean that unions have to fight harder and harder at the negotiating table to keep their benefits and to keep seniority rights in their contract. In fact, the union that represents workers at Moncure Plywood, about 30 minutes south of here, has been on strike since July over several issues including the company's proposal to end seniority rights. Other unions have to fight to protect pensions and to keep health benefits for retirees.

You also find companies asking unions to lower wages and benefits for new hires, in effect, creating a two-tier workforce. Unfortunately, unions sometimes agree to lower wages for new hires in order to protect benefits for current members. All of this means that the aging workforce of the future

probably won't have the job security and retirement income that current union members have.

Seniors within the Labor Movement

Today's union retirees were union members at a time when the labor movement was at its peak and workers were able to get their just rewards. Because of that, most older union members have defined benefit pensions that pay them a decent salary during retirement. Having such good pensions means that a lot of older union members have been able to retire relatively young in their early 50s. Some kick back, fish, and enjoy their retirement. Others take a part-time job because they want to be active and have some structure to their days. And more and more union retirees stay active in the labor movement because they recognize what a union membership did for them and they want to fight to make sure that other workers have the same protections.

We at the AFL-CIO recognizes the potential that union retirees offer. They understand the union way and they have free time and can volunteer so in 2001 the national AFL-CIO and a coalition of community organizations created the Alliance for Retired Americans to engage union retirees and promote the concept of lifelong unionism.

Many union retirees remained active in the union movement, but the Alliance for Retired Americans helped union retirees get more involved by developing their own structure, organization, and agenda.

Within each state, there is a network of union retiree organizations. Local unions with a lot of retired members have local union retiree clubs that meet regularly so here in Raleigh all the retired telephone workers from the Communication Workers of America meet regularly and for retirees who moved here from another state or whose local union doesn't have a retiree club, we've formed at large clubs that include retirees from a variety of unions. The clubs come together to form a regional Alliance for Retired Americans councils and together the councils form a state Alliance for Retired Americans chapter.

Through their retiree clubs and the state Alliance for Retired Americans, union retirees work hard on many issues that seniors and working families care about. For example several years ago, union retirees within our state staged events protesting the privatization of Social Security. During debates

about the Medicare prescription drug benefit, our retirees were a force advocating for affordable prescription drugs. When Medicare Part D was finalized, the NC Alliance sponsored community forums to help retirees understand the options available to them before they enrolled. The Alliance has also been a voice for better care for our veterans.

In addition to working on issues that affect seniors, our union retirees and the NC Alliance for Retired Americans join with the AFL-CIO to advocate for policy changes to benefit working families generally.

The AFL-CIO has three main program areas:

- 1-legislative lobbying
- 2-political program
- 3-support for union organizing

In all of these areas, union retirees are essential participants. For example, when we call on our members to lobby legislators on important issues, retirees have joined current union members to lobby for an increase in the minimum wage, creation of a state EITC, protection of our workers' comp system, and expansion of mortgage assistance programs. They have written, called and visited legislators on a host of our issues.

Every odd-numbered year, during the "long" session of our GA, the NC AFL-CIO holds legislative meetings in 8 areas of the state with local legislators to go over our legislative agenda. We always try to have a good turnout of members at these meetings and many times, retirees have made the difference, coming out in large numbers and in some cases, outnumbering current members.

The AFL-CIO's second program area is our political program. We endorse candidates whom we believe will support working family issues. Once we make the endorsements, then we work throughout the election cycle to educate rank and file union members about the issues and our candidates.

Although the state Alliance for Retired Americans is nonpartisan, many union retirees are politically active through their retiree clubs and local unions. Through those avenues, retirees work our political program by volunteering to stuff envelopes, staff phone banks, or pass out leaflets at their union meetings.

Retirees also participate in our third program area, which is support for union activities like organizing campaigns and strikes. When we really need people to walk a picket line or come to a rally in support of workers trying to organize, I know that I can count on our retirees to come through.

Conclusion

To sum up, retirees are an essential part of the NC labor movement and help make our programs successful. The AFL-CIO will continue to engage seniors and involve more of them in our programs. The labor movement will also continue to fight to make sure that the aging workforce of the future gets the proper respect that they deserve—that includes protecting seniority rights and providing retirement security. All workers regardless of age deserve respect and dignity on the job, and the NC AFL-CIO will fight to make that happen.