

Civil Service more important than ever

By Bill Franks



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The COVID recession is here, and the people of Wisconsin need and deserve more help from the State. Unemployment Insurance, rental assistance, virus testing and tracing are just a few expanded services needed now from state agencies.

The 30,000 state workers who deliver these services work under the Wisconsin Civil Service, a system designed to stop the hiring of political cronies and the intrusion of corporate influence into state agencies.

Wisconsin Civil Service was signed into law 115 years ago by Fighting Bob La Follette on June 17, 1905. It was a victory for the millions who struggled during the Progressive era movements for clean government. Political parties and their corporate funders have always been at odds with Wisconsin Civil Service because it curtails their power to use state agencies for narrow partisan purposes and for furthering corporate power.

The principle of merit-based hiring on objective standards sounds so common-sense that it should not need to be stated or enforced. However, State Workers know the threats to its practice are intense and daily. Eternal vigilance and ongoing, active pressure by Public Sector Unions is necessary to ensure clean government that serves all residents equitably.

Wisconsin Civil Service is also a tool to promote fair hiring and promotion of women, racial minorities, LGBTQ and other protected groups in state agencies, something the Progressive Era founders may not have appreciated, but we know is important today.

Without Public Employee Unions, Civil Service might have been killed off when an imminent threat to replace Wisconsin's state employees with political supporters arose in 1932. Instead, State Workers formed the Wisconsin State Employee Association, later part of AFSCME, to protect Wisconsin Civil Service, and preserve it. In recent decades, several Administrations have weakened and eroded Civil Service, most notably Governor Scott Walker with 2011's Act 10 and 2015's Act 150

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that ended the requirement for civil service exams.

Since 2011, if a state agency worker has to speak out to stand up for the public, it is more difficult to hold on to their job because of the erosion of civil service protections.

Our Unions and community supporters must keep the pressure on political leaders to strengthen Wisconsin Civil Service in law and in practice so that public workers are free to do their jobs without political interference, and so the public can get the high quality services they deserve.

Civil service is closely related to other Progressive-Era programs such as Workers Compensation and Unemployment Insurance. Civil Service is also related to key democratic developments, such as direct elections, easy voter registration, and campaign finance rules.

Civil service is so important, it can be the difference between life and death in some cases. Public workers who are competent, unbiased and able to question illegal orders mean a great deal when it comes to inspecting your

meat, repairing elevators, registering the electorate, keeping accurate data on the spreading of diseases, enumeration of deaths, and all the other key public functions performed by State Agencies.

State Workers who regulate industry to promote clean air and water often are in conflict with for-profit businesses that prefer to not consider the effects of their operations on the neighbors. Without protection, state workers cannot do their jobs properly which contributes to tragedies in public health such as water poisoning and bridge and dam collapses.

We live in an era of super-powerful multinational corporate power, and we need tools such as Civil Service to help us mold public agencies that counter

this force so that ordinary Wisconsinites can get services.

Recently, business interests and some politicians have been pushing to re-open states quickly before the Corona Virus risk is over, no matter whether workplaces are safe or workers lose their lives needlessly in the process.

This prioritization of profit-making is clearly at odds with our values in the Labor Movement. Workers are people first, not mere human capital. In the current crisis, expanding public services will allow families to survive economically until the virus risk is controlled. We need a stronger Wisconsin Civil Service and stronger unions to make sure these services are distributed widely and fairly to all.

Bill Franks is Chief Steward Emeritus of AFT 4848, the Wisconsin Professional Employee Council. He is also chair of the Labor & Industry Committee of the NAACP of Dane County Branch AB and a member of Protect Our Wisconsin Retirement Security (POWRS). All of these groups are part of the Wisconsin Coalition to Save Civil Service

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