Commentary

Nearly 1 in 5 leave Illinois government union since getting a choice

By MAILEE SMITH
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AFSCME Council 31's own federal reports show 18.5% of workers have chosen to break away since the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in Janus v. AFSCME. It could be because less than 21% of the union's spending is on representing its members.

More than 12,000 state and local government workers across Illinois have chosen not to join or pay fees to the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 31 since the U.S. Supreme Court restored their ability to choose in 2018 in Janus v. AFSCME.

That 18.5% drop is a strong indication AFSCME's leadership is out of touch with what its members want.

The union's decline is revealed in reports it filed with the U.S. Department of Labor. In 2017, the last full reporting year before Janus, more than 65,000 employees paid dues or fees to AFSCME Council 31, the state council affiliate for AFSCME in Illinois. But that number dropped to just over 53,000 when the latest 2022 report was filed at the end of March 2023.

And it's not just Illinois. AFSCME's national affiliate has seen nearly 172,000 workers choose not to affiliate with the union since 2017. That represents a drop of 12% nationwide.

Less than 21% of AFSCME Council 31's spending is on representing members

One of the most common reasons members leave their unions: they don't feel well represented. Union leaders' political agendas and the labor strife created by strikes get in the way of what unions are supposed to be doing.

"I was in the AFSCME union and we just got no backing at all. The entire time I was president they never took up any grievance that we brought to them. Not one," said John Moss, a former AFSCME member. "They never had any backing for us at all. They never would stand up for us, they never did anything for us. We weren't being represented. They wanted our dues, [and] to increase our dues … The only thing they want to benefit is themselves, their own checkbooks."

In 2022, less than 21% of AFSCME Council 31's spending was on representing workers, according to its report with the U.S. Department of Labor. The rest was on politics, administration and other union leadership priorities.

AFSCME's national affiliate fared even worse. Just 13% of its spending in 2022 was on representation. It spent nearly twice as much on "political activities and lobbying" as it did on representing members – what should be its core focus.

How state and local government employees can opt out of union membership

State and local government workers can leave their union – and not pay dues or fees – whether they feel poorly represented, object to their money going to politics or for any other reason.

Typically, Illinois government unions require members to send a written opt-out request.

Union members can opt out of membership at any time. However, some unions only allow members to stop paying dues at certain times during the year. The best way to determine that window of time is to submit opt-out paperwork, prompting the union to respond with information on the opt-out timeline.

State and local government employees interested in joining the thousands of other Illinois employees who have opted out of their unions can find everything they need at LeaveMyUnion.com.

• *Mailee Smith is senior director of Labor Policy and staff attorney for the Illinois Policy Institute.*

POINT/COUNTERPOINT:

Leaders weigh in on the impact and use of AI in the workplace

EDITOR'S NOTE: AI, or artificial intelligence, is a hot topic of discussion across industries these days: ChatGPT and GPT-4, Jasper, Bard, Bing, Alexa, Cortana, Einstein, Watson, and many more. What will their impact be? Will AI replace humans in jobs? Can it maximize efficiency? Or is it flawed and still needing us humans to "work out the kinks?" Today's business and industry leaders have noted that they are excited, skeptical, complacent, apathetic, or perhaps even scared of what can become of AI in the workplace. Here's a sampling of what they've said:

Bill Gates, co-founder, Microsoft: In February, Bill Gates said in a Forbes interview that AI is "every bit as important as the PC, as the internet." In a 7-page letter Gates published on AI the same day Google released Bard, he wrote that building AI is "as fundamental as the creation of the microprocessor, the personal computer, the internet, and the mobile phone."

In his letter titled "The Age of AI has Begun," Gates further wrote that AI can serve as a "digital personal assistant" for workers, and can help healthcare workers and teachers make their jobs easier. Gates had previously expressed his excitement about AI's future, including how it could be used as a tutor in education or to provide medical advice to people where doctors aren't easily accessible. Gates acknowledged that he personally uses ChatGPT "primarily for serious purposes" but also for "fun things like writing poetry."

Andy Jassy, CEO, Amazon: Andy Jassy is also excited to see what the possibilities are with generative AI, according to the Financial Times. He also said that its potential is nothing new. "Most large, deeply technical companies like ours, have been working on these very large, generative AI models themselves for a long time," Jassy said.

Sundar Pichai, CEO, Alphabet and Google: During a recent earnings call with Alphabet's investors, Sundar Pichai said that AI "is the most profound technology" being developed by his company. Google's AI-powered chatbot is known as "Bard," with the public getting its first taste of it back in February.

Elon Musk, CEO, Twitter; co-founder, OpenAI: Elon Musk co-founded ChatGPT maker OpenAI. He has since left the company. During a recent conference, however, CNBC reports that Musk noted AI as "one of the biggest risks to the future of civilization." When asked further about ChatGPT, he said that the tool is "both positive or negative, with great promise, even if it comes with great danger."

Repeatedly sounding the alarm over AI's potential threats, Musk has said, "It is, I think, actually a bigger risk to society than cars or planes or medicine." And back in 2015, when Musk co-founded OpenAI with current CEO Sam Alman, he said at that time that AI was the "biggest existential threat to humanity."

Charlie Munger, billionaire investor: According to Business Insider, billionaire investor Charlie Munger said he's not that impressed by AI in its current state. During a recent Daily Journal meeting, broadcast live on CNBC, Munger said, "Artificial intelligence is very important, but there's also a lot of crazy hype on the subject." He further noted that while AI can be useful in completing tasks like insurance underwriting, it is limited in completing other tasks. "AI is not going to cure cancer, it's not going to do everything that we want done, and there's a lot of nonsense in it too. So I regard it as a mixed blessing."

Melissa Werneck, EVP, global chief people officer, Kraft Heinz Co.: At the recent Wall Street Journal Jobs Summit, Melissa Werneck said, "AI is the next revolution and there is no going back."

Predictions that AI could replace blue-collar jobs have existed as long as AI itself has. And, in fact, in the story published by the WSJ that looked at a new study by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania and OpenAI, it was noted that "most jobs will be changed in some form by generative pretrained transformers, or GPTs, which use machine learning based on internet data to generate any kind of text, from creative writing to code."

Julia Pollak, chief economist, ZipRecruiter Inc.: "Every month there are hundreds more job postings mentioning generative AI," said Pollak to the Wall Street Journal. "There is an enormous demand for people who are tech-savvy and who will be the first adopters, who will be the first to figure out what opportunities these technologies open up."

Jeff Maggioncalda, chief executive, Coursera Inc.: Noting that there are opportunities for workforce improvements coming out of the AI movement, Jeff Maggioncalda told the WSJ, "The way things have been done in the past aren't necessarily the way they need to be done today." Maggioncalda added that workers and employers should invest in retraining and upskilling where possible.

Malaika Myers, chief human resources officer, Hyatt Hotels Corp.: Myers told the WSJ that she "doesn't see AI replacing workers soon but expects it to better serve and engage consumers." For the hotel chain, she further noted, that could look like using AI to determine which brand of wine a guest likes and adjusting recommendations accordingly.

EDITOR'S FINAL NOTE: In case you're wondering, this compilation was pulled together by a human. The research that led to its published outcome was conducted through a regular, old-fashioned search utilizing the search bar tools in both Google and LinkedIn.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The opinions expressed in this publication on its Commentary page are those of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the opinions or views of the Illinois Business Journal or its corporate family.)