

# OCSEA -- A Brief History



The **Ohio Civil Service Employees Association** was formed on April 15, 1938, by James Bowman, a Department of Liquor Control employee from Cleveland, who lost his job for political reasons. Frustrated by the lack of rights, protections, compensation and benefits for public workers, Bowman sought to eliminate the "spoils" system where politics dominated hiring. He wanted to foster the careers of Ohio public employees, and he dreamed of an organization that would fight for state employees' rights.

## Early victories

Bowman tragically died shortly after establishing OCSEA, but others quickly filled his shoes and turned OCSEA into an effective organization that has been behind nearly every pay raise, benefit improvement and retirement increase in the last five decades.

In 1943, OCSEA won the first across-the-board pay increase for state employees, resulting in a 10% raise. In 1947, OCSEA conducted the first broad study on employee classifications, job descriptions and salary schedules. The result was the first comprehensive list of public employee jobs and the creation of uniform pay schedules, the latter ending pay differences in similar jobs that were as large as 210%.

A major OCSEA undertaking involved the 40-hour work week. In 1941, hospital aides were working 72 hours a week. Although "female labor laws" that were on the books during those years stated that a woman couldn't work more than 48 hours a week, the state managers routinely violated this rule. Finally, in 1955, OCSEA helped to pass a law that for the first time gave public employees the right to a 40-hour work week.

## Membership

Records show that a few months after OCSEA's start, 150 members were paying \$1.00 annual dues. In 1944, OCSEA crossed the threshold of having over 5,000 members for the first time. In 1947, OCSEA's 10,000 members made it the second largest public employees union in the United States.

By 1975, OCSEA had 26,000 members, but membership leveled off as OCSEA faced increased competition from rival unions and employee organizations. After affiliation with AFSCME and subsequent victories in state bargaining unit elections, OCSEA membership grew to 38,000.

## Collective Bargaining

In the early years, OCSEA leaders became frustrated by the legal battles, needed in the civil service fight. Legislative changes were just as frustrating because pay raises and employee policies could be reversed by a simple re-vote or change in administration.

In the 1960's, OCSEA began looking seriously at collective bargaining as a solution. Slowly, OCSEA gained members-only contracts for employees in a number of departments such as ODOT, MH and MR. But even these contracts were of limited scope. The demand for full-scale public employee collective bargaining grew. first collective bargaining legislative proposal. Several such bills were passed by the General Assembly only to be vetoed by Gov. James Rhodes. Not to be defeated, OCSEA kept up the pressure. A new bill was successfully introduced in 1982 and signed into law by Gov. Celeste, July 6, 1983.

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## **Affiliation with AFSCME**

Even before 1983, OCSEA leaders had the foresight to see that collective bargaining was coming and that the association would need additional support to make the transition to a new era. In 1982, OCSEA investigated several of the United States' leading unions including the Teamsters, SEIU, AFGE and CWA. Eventually, OCSEA settled on AFSCME, which had superior public employee experience and the ability to permit a large degree of autonomy for its affiliates. OCSEA formally affiliated with AFSCME on May 14, 1983.

## **First statewide contract**

After OCSEA members won the right to collective bargaining, they embarked on one of the largest organizing drives in union history. In April, 1984, OCSEA was the first union that formally filed to represent state employees, submitting petitions to represent

over 40,000 workers. OCSEA/AFSCME led the first large-scale organizing campaign in the nation to use TV and radio advertising, opinion surveys, "focus groups" and direct mail to convey that OCSEA was "The Strongest Voice for State Employees Rights."

Although other unions also sought to represent state workers, OCSEA/AFSCME emerged as the clear winner. In 1986, OCSEA entered the first state-wide contract negotiations affecting over 32,000 employees. The first contract went into effect that year.

1986 marked the first time that state employees had a comprehensive contract that would govern every aspect of their working lives, an accomplishment that was only possible due to the immense effort that stretched back nearly five decades to James Bowman and his original dream of an organization that would fight for public workers.

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