

A union in every working household

Five years ago, the former Montana Education Association (MEA) and the former Montana Federation of Teachers (MFT) merged.

A decade of pre-merger activities convinced us that by merging we could better serve our diverse and growing membership. At the same time, two other NEA and AFT state affiliates merged—Minnesota and Florida. Minnesota and Florida merged look-alike unions of public school educators and support personnel.

But here in Montana, we merged public school teachers and support personnel; state, county, and municipal employees; higher education faculty; Head Start instructors; and private health care employees.

We are the prototype

We believe MEA-MFT could be the model for the merger of our two national affiliates. We are dismayed that some folks in NEA and AFT still have trouble imagining the strength and vitality a national merger would provide. All they would need to do to see endless, positive possibilities would be to cast their attention on what we have done here in Montana.

Our professional development, contract bargaining and maintenance, leadership training, legal defense, coalition building, political action, and lobbying are second to none. Competently representing all our members who live and work in nearly every Montana community keeps us on our toes—ever learning better ways of doing business. We make mistakes, but we are determined to correct them.

And, as unions must do to survive, we are organizing new members and new locals.

Since merger we have organized school support personnel at Arrowhead, Fort Benton, Hardin, Little Rocky, Plains, Potomac, Rocky Boy, Townsend, and Wolf Point; teachers at Arrowhead, Great Divide and Prickly Pear Co-ops, and Powell County; state employees at Youth Challenge and Riverside; employees at Townsend Health Care; deputy county attorneys in Cascade County; and faculty at Miles Community College and Montana Tech.

We are right now distributing information

and collecting cards from employees in a number of school districts, state agencies, health care facilities, and soon the one unorganized public higher education unit in Montana—MSU-Bozeman.

We enjoy 16,000 active members. Add on our dues-paying retirees and student members and we are 17,000 strong.

Organizing is a primary product of our merger.

The truth is the old MEA had become too satisfied with business as usual. MEA was growing but not going out of its way to do so. MEA emphasized quality member services. On the other hand, the old MFT emphasized organizing the unorganized. MFT was very good at it.

When we merged, we blended the best of both unions.

The driving, most insistent, and most compelling force behind our commitment to organizing was and still is MEA-MFT Vice President Jim McGarvey.

When Jim talks organizing, he talks his life's work. It is his passion. He has made it ours.

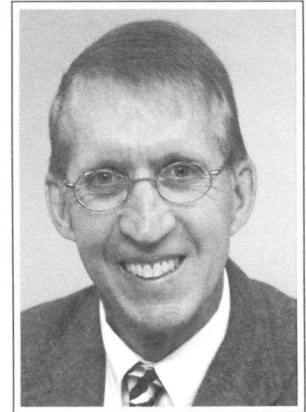
Soon, very soon, we hope organizing will become the passion of the Montana State AFL-CIO. Last month, at its 49th annual convention, the AFL-CIO elected Jim McGarvey its executive secretary. By the end of June, Jim will be in charge of this union of unions. He will push and pull affiliated unions to organize and grow the union movement.

Grow or die

Jim's goal—a union in every working household—is not just a dream, it is a necessity. Vibrant public and private sector unions demand that each other succeed in their work. The union movement is only as strong as our weakest union.

But more importantly, the unorganized who have no union, no collective power, and do not enjoy quality salaries, benefits, and working conditions will not long suffer a union movement that works only to hoard these things unto itself. A union movement that does not grow will die.

Good luck, brother Jim. We will be there with you throughout. ■



BY ERIC FEAVER
MEA-MFT PRESIDENT

Anatomy of a merger

For a summary of MEA-MFT's pre-merger activities, visit our web site at www.mea-mft.org/chron.html.