

Two years old and growing

Ready for some good news? Really good news? MEA-MFT is two years old and growing! We are 16,000 professional and support personnel living and working all over Montana. We are the state's largest union. We are 40 percent of the AFL-CIO. We are everywhere.

Yes, we are.

Actually we are older than two. In 1882, 120 years ago, before statehood, territorial educators came together and formed the Montana Education Association. In the 1930s, teachers in Anaconda and Butte pieced together the first public employee collective bargaining units in Montana and birthed the Montana Federation of Teachers.

Time passed and two years ago, September 1, 2000, the former MEA and the former MFT merged into one.

One union, one voice, one advocate

MEA-MFT has grown up with Montana. Those who wish us ill and wait for us to disappear, wait in vain. We are past, present, and future. One union, one voice, one advocate for our members and the vital work our members do.

For example:

In the lamentable August special legislative session, we fought the governor's proposed cuts in human services, the university system, and k-12 public schools. We enjoyed modest success in k-12, saving half of what the governor wanted to meat-ax. But we were unable to convince legislators from either political party that an increase in the tobacco tax would erase cuts in this biennium and provide a substantial revenue stream well into the future. In 2003, on this and other tax proposals, we will be back.

Resolve

Our primary opponents are indeed the governor and legislators pledged to no-new-taxes who prefer to balance the state's budget on the backs of the students, patients, clients, and communities we serve. Regrettably, she and they have not abandoned their intent to de-fund government. We have not abandoned our intent to fund it.

Two years ago, in concert with MPEA, we bar-

gained with another governor a reasonable state pay plan that the 2001 Legislature ratified only to smash it up a bit in the August special session. In the current round of prebudget negotiations, this governor has to date promised us nothing.

The state's purported \$250 million structural imbalance and the governor's never-say-die proposed income tax cut take precedence, or so she says. The 2003 Legislature could be one bitter winter for state employees. We'll be fighting for them.

We have joined with courageous school districts representing more than half of our state's k-12 students and filed suit asserting the state has failed its constitutional obligation to adequately fund quality public schools.

Our lawsuit is not an end in itself. It is only a tool with which we may yet hammer sense into the misshapen school funding scheme the legislature adopted in 1993 and subsequently left to crash and burn on the deck. And regardless of how the courts rule, we must still elect state leaders who honestly support public school funding.

Hence in the November general elections, we are promoting candidates from both parties who believe Montana really is a community of folks who care about neighbors in need and the education of other people's children. For sure, we desperately need a real two-party system to challenge the social Darwinist ideologues who dominate the majority party's politics.

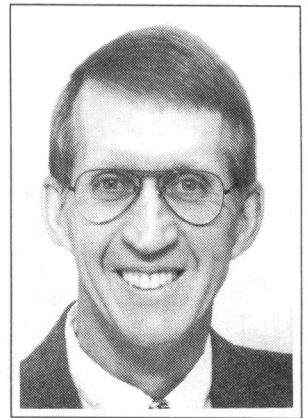
Our strength is our members

We are bargaining and defending contracts all over the state. In the last analysis, our strength is our members and our local bargaining units. We exist to serve them. Without them there is no MEA-MFT. Conversely, without MEA-MFT, public employee collective bargaining is toast.

So we will shortly launch the most ambitious membership and local organizing campaign in the short history of our new union. We have so much more to do. We can do it so much better with more members and more bargaining units.

As we grow, we grow stronger.

My regards to you all. You do important work—work that matters—and you do it well. ■



BY ERIC FEAYER
MEA-MFT PRESIDENT

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