

**IN MY OPINION****Caroline Porter****Local AFSCME local suffers from poor leadership**

I've had bad experiences with the local AFSCME union organization for over a decade — ever since I tried to discuss the finances of the Knox County Nursing Home in the early 1990s and union members tried to intimidate me and the other County Board members. They even went so far as to say I didn't like old people. They don't say that to me anymore, because, well, you know, I am one. My daughter worked in a state institution in Jacksonville, was very active in her AFSCME union, and was hurt on the job. She has never received a dime of Workman's Compensation and her union didn't lift a finger for her. So much for union dues and participation.

The local courthouse union, the organization of which I supported, has leaders whose actions are motivated by personal vendettas and not the best interests of their members or the community. Some workers have told me that Judy Johnson, president of the courthouse union, has gone from office to office during working hours harassing employees — and that is against the rules of their contract.

Now I'm being raked over the coals in their newsletter and being called anti-union, which will certainly come as a surprise to the

unions who supported me in my campaign for the Knox County Board, such as the Electrical Workers, Plumbers and Pipefitters, Carpenters, and Local Laborers 538. There are good unions and bad unions and they can be distinguished by their leadership and business representatives. Unfortunately, the Council 31 AFSCME representative is also a poor leader, uncooperative, and a bully.

They have been endorsing candidates in this upcoming primary and their endorsements are quite irrelevant. Not only are they motivated by personal issues, they don't represent the membership. They have a political action group called PEOPLE and union members were invited to contribute and join. Problem is, the leadership picked a few people who agreed with their personal opinions and left out the rest of the committee.

Contracts with all the unions within the Knox County government structure have been negotiated and agreed upon. The County board, myself included, approved the contracts. I remember when most of the employees in the courthouse were eligible for food stamps. As an office worker for most of my working career, I know what the salaries were and it was a disgrace.

So why don't we get down to the nitty-gritty. The husband of the courthouse union president is county board member, Steve Johnson. On the subject of the Public Defender's office, he has many conflicts of interest. His wife has worked there for eight years, so a good chunk of their income comes from her salary. When the Public Defender, with direction from the board, reorganized his office, the Johnson's best friends, Chris Kanthak and Kim Norton, were not hired as contract attorneys. When the office was divided into three operations for more comprehensive representation purposes, Judy Johnson was moved out of the courthouse into the annex.

I am one of three board members (Pickrel and Saline) who has been vocal about Johnson's conflict of interest and asked him not to participate in discussions of the public defender's office and union negotiations. It's clear to me that the Johnsons exchange information from closed union negotiations and closed meetings of the county board.

It will be a happy day indeed when several of the local AFSCME unions change leadership, start to represent their membership and cooperate with county officials.



This unproductive and mean-spirited attitude hurts only one entity, the local AFSCME unions.

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