



# WEP/GPO Repeal Signed Into Law By President Biden



#### They Said it Would Never Happen – They were Wrong!

**Washington, DC**- For the past four decades, the Social Security Administration has robbed more than \$60 billion dollars in Social Security benefits from millions of men and women and their spouses simply because these workers, or their spouses, worked hard for most of their lives to earn a public pension, and despite the fact that they paid into the Social Security system at the same rate as everyone else.

This longstanding injustice finally ended on January 5th when President Biden signed the Social Security Fairness Act into law. The bill fully repealed two antiquated provisions of Social Security law that slashed both individual benefits and spousal survivor benefits if that individual or surviving spouse also received benefits from a public pension.

President Biden's signature on the bill capped a series of stunning and inspiring acts of bipartisanship in both branches of Congress over the past two months, where Republican and Democratic Party lawmakers joined forces to navigate through multiple complicated procedural hurdles and proposed amendments, all of which were aimed at defeating the measure.

However, in the end, proponents of the legislation prevailed. The bill cleared the House of Representatives by a margin of 327-75 on November 12th. A little over five weeks later, on December 21st, the bill passed the Senate by a margin of 76-20 on the final day of the Senate session.

"We've been waiting for this win for a long time, but not nearly as long as our retired members who have suffered under these provisions for decades," said Council 93 Executive Director Mark Bernard who, along with long-serving Council 93 Retiree Chapter President Ed Keefe and the Council's Legislative Director Jim Durkin, were at the White (WEP/GPO Repeal pg. 2)

#### WEP/GPO Repeal

(Continued from pg. 1)



President Joe Biden and Massachusetts Senator Ed Markey with Council 93 Executive Director Mark Bernard, Director of Legislation and Political Action Jim Durkin, and former Retiree Chapter President Ed Keefe at the White House for the signing of Social Security Fairness Act House to witness the historic bill signing. "While we are elated by the victory, the joy is tempered by some sadness when we think about people like Barbara Mann, who as a longtime leader within our Retiree Chapter has been fighting this battle since I was a kid and has lost hundreds of thousands of dollars over more than 30 years through both the WEP and GPO. It is extremely gratifying to finish the job she, along with Ed Keefe, started many years ago by pushing this bill across the finish line and giving people like Barbara the benefits she, and her departed husband, paid for over many years."

It's hard to believe that after forty years of fighting, we have finally put an end to this injustice!

#### -Barbara Mann

"It's hard to believe that after forty years of fighting, we have finally put an end to this injustice," said Mann, one of the longest-serving AFSCME Retiree leaders in the country. "As someone who has worked in both the private and public sector and a widow entitled to my husband's survivor benefits, my Social Security benefits have been slashed by thousands of dollars annually for the past several decades. I'm thrilled that I'll finally be receiving the benefits that my husband and I paid for and earned through our contributions to Social Security, but I'm even happier for future generations of retirees who will not have to endure what I and millions of other hard-working women and men have endured for so long."

While Council 93 had the support of every member of the House and Senate in our four-state region on the final votes, five of our United States Senators were critical in the battle to move the bill to President Biden's desk. Maine Republican U.S. Senator Susan Collins was the original co-sponsor of the bill in the Senate and worked to build strong bi-partisan support for the legislation. She was joined in these efforts by Maine's Independent Senator Angus King and Vermont Independent Bernie Sanders, Massachusetts Senators Ed Markey and Elizabeth Warren were crucial throughout the process, but especially in the final days and hours of the session when they aggressively pushed Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer to schedule a floor vote during a particularly busy and chaotic time in Congress. In addition, Senators Markey, Warren, and King kept us constantly updated through phone calls and text messages. "We owe a great deal of thanks to every legislator who voted the right way on this bill, but I believe we simply would not be where we are today without the support of these five Senators," Bernard said.

Bernard also praised the leadership of AFSCME International President Lee Saunders and his legislative staff in Washington, DC for building support across the nation for the legislation.

"President Saunders and his team knew how important this issue was to our members, and they did a phenomenal job when we really needed them most," Bernard said. "I'm very proud of what our national Union did and what we did at Council 93, but of course, we didn't do it alone. So many unions and retiree organizations have worked on this issue for decades. The International (*Cont. pg. 3*)

#### **WEP/GPO** (Continued from pg. 2)

Association of Firefighters, both here in New England and across the nation, our teachers and law enforcement unions, the Massachusetts and Maine AFL-CIO State Federations, I could go on and on," Bernard said, "but none of our organizations' leaders and staff would have been successful without the grassroots lobbying efforts of our members. I want to thank all of our active and retired members for responding to our multiple requests for them to lobby their Representatives and Senators. For those who may wonder if this work makes a difference, I think this proves that, in fact, it does!"

Under the old law, the WEP significantly reduced a worker's Social Security benefit if the worker was also eligible to collect a public pension. The reduction happened automatically even if that worker was entitled to a Social Security benefit from work they did before they started their public-sector job, or from a second job they worked in conjunction with their public-sector job.

The Government Pension Offset (GPO) significantly reduced any survivor's benefit a worker's spouse may be entitled to, if the spouse received a public pension from a job not covered by Social Security - despite the fact that they were entitled to the survivor benefit based on their spouse's past work in a Social Security covered job. Eighty-three percent of the people impacted by the GPO are women.

It's important to note that many organizations gave up hope on full repeal years ago and in recent years began standing behind a substandard compromise bill led by Massachusetts Congressman Richard Neal. In the previous congressional session, Neal was chairman of the powerful House Ways and Means Committee. He is currently the 'ranking' minority party leader on the Committee. Neal's bill offered modest improvements to the WEP, but completely ignored the GPO. Despite the growing willingness to surrender and accept compromise, Council 93 and our Retiree Chapter refused to give up and yield any ground to politicians and advocacy organizations who were eager to put the issue behind them and claim any level of victory. "We were told we were dreamers, that it would never happen, that it was just too expensive. We heard every excuse in the book," Bernard said of the naysayers. "It's been a real pleasure proving people wrong."

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#### -Mark Bernard

For decades now, the issue has been wrongfully portrayed as a problem that only impacted retired public employees in a handful of states. Led by Bernard, our union embarked on an aggressive campaign to re-frame the issue. In countless communications with members, our union correctly portrayed this as an active employee issue by reminding our members that "if we don't fix this now, you and your spouse will be next." The Council also started educating our brothers and sisters in private-sector unions. Focusing on the GPO, we reminded these unions that any of their members who were married to public-sector workers would see their spouses lose their survivor benefit if they pre-deceased their spouse, even though they had paid for this (Cont. pg. 4)

#### **WEP/GPO** (Continued from pg. 3)

survivor benefit through the Social Security payroll tax. This hit home with these private sector workers, many of whom planned on providing this benefit to their wives and husbands and viewed it as the only form of 'life insurance' they could afford. As part of the reframing, we also noted that because the problem had been in place for 40 years, it was no longer confined to a few states. In fact, there are now people living in every state who are impacted by the WEP or GPO, or both.

After successfully implementing this new approach in the Council 93 region and seeing positive results, our union then set out to expand it to the national level. At the 2022 AFSCME International Convention in Philadelphia, Bernard joined Council 93 Retiree Chapter President Ed Keefe in filing a resolution at the convention that called on the Union to implement the same reframing of the issue on a national level. It passed unanimously. Bernard, who serves as the Northern New England District Representative on the AFSCME International Executive Board, was also quite vocal on the issue at board meetings and in conversations with national leaders and staff.

Slowly but surely, the new approach began to work not just here in the Council 93 region, but throughout the country. While there has always been at least a simple majority of support in the House for full repeal, it wasn't until this current session that we not only reached a majority in the Senate, but surpassed a Senate majority by ten votes.

However, as time moved on, it began to seem as though the legislation would suffer the same fate as always – lots of talk, lots of co-sponsors, but no vote. Seeing this current session as our best opportunity to finish the job, Council 93 began turning up the heat on Congressman Neal. We started by stopping all political contributions to Neal from PEOPLE, our political action committee funded exclusively by voluntary contributions from members. Then in June, Council 93's five representatives on the Massachusetts AFL-CIO Executive Board expanded the pressure on the Congressman. When it came time for endorsement votes for the state's Congressional Delegation, Council 93's reps

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-Mark Bernard

successfully convinced the state federation board to table the endorsements so we could take a "wait and see" approach. We hoped to convince Neal to sign on to the full repeal legislation, and we also wanted to make sure that other members of the delegation did not fall victim to pressure and pull their support should the bill come to a floor vote. Having been burned by outgoing New Hampshire Democratic Congresswoman Ann Kuster, who pulled her support from a move to force a floor vote in the previous session, Council 93 knew all too well that our so-called friends could cave to pressure.

But when the MA AFL-CIO board met again in September, we still didn't have a vote or a commitment from Neal, and decisions had to be made on endorsements at this final meeting before the November election. After speaking again about AFSCME's problems with Neal on this issue and informing the full board that the five AFSCME reps would be voting against Neal's endorsement, he failed to secure the two-thirds majority support needed, and was the only Massachusetts Congressman who was not endorsed by the AFL-CIO. (*Cont. pg. 5*)

# Springfield Library Workers' Perseverance Leads to Safety Improvements After Tragedy

**Springfield, MA**- Members of Local 1596 at the Springfield City Library have achieved a longdelayed victory in improving street safety with the installation of a crosswalk on State Street near the main library branch through sheer grit and persistence.

In November 2021 librarian Gayle Ball, a longtime Local 1596 member, was tragically killed while leaving work. She was one of several pedestrians who had been killed on State Street - one of the busiest streets in Springfield - over the last few years.

The members of the Local demanded action from the City to ensure the safety of pedestrians, and the City agreed to install better lighting and a signaled crosswalk across State Street. However, years of bureaucracy and delay followed. In July 2023, the members of the Local began conducting standouts on Fridays as well as other public actions, continually bringing attention to

the City's refusal to fulfill its promise to protect the public.

Former Local 1596 President Chelsea Bell organized the standouts. "We really wanted to raise awareness for people around Springfield and hold the City responsible for the installation."

Despite the City's inexcusable conduct, the members of the Local continued to act in solidarity, and even brought in other Locals in the City to help. Bell noted "the lack of a sidewalk had been an issue for the librarians for years, because Gayle's was not the first death to occur at that site, but it became extra important to our Local when we lost one of our members who was dear to so many of her colleagues."

While these improvements took much longer than they should have and are far too late for those who have lost their lives on State Street, the members of Local 1596 refused to give up in doing what was right. While they cannot bring back their union sister, Local 1596 has helped make the City of Springfield safer for everyone.

# WEP/GPO

#### (Continued from pg. 4)

Thanks in large part to the leadership of MA AFL-CIO President Chrissy Lynch and Secretary-Treasurer Kevin Brousseau, the endorsement vote led to direct dialogue with Neal's Washington, DC staff and Council 93. Our message to Neal's team was simple: We will view anything short of full repeal as a loss and we will not accept any compromise. In the end, when the floor vote was held, Neal did the right thing and joined his 326 colleagues in voting yes for full repeal, sending the strongest bill possible to the Senate for consideration.

Bringing active members and other unions into the fight is what made the difference. It's my hope that every Retiree Chapter in our Union will develop the same strong relationship with their affiliates going forward.

-Ed Keefe

"The cooperation and support we received from Mark Bernard and his team at Council 93 was simply incredible and should serve as a model for affiliates and Retiree Chapters across the nation," said Keefe. "The new messaging we developed and implemented together finally boiled this complicated issue down to something people could understand, and ultimately helped their Senators and Representatives understand. Most importantly, bringing active members and other unions into the fight is what made the difference. It's my hope that every Retiree Chapter in our Union will develop the same strong relationship with their affiliates going forward."

# **AFSCME Council 93 Spreads Holiday Cheer**

**Boston, MA**- The holiday season is a time to reflect on the joys and blessings of the past year, but it is also important to remember that not everyone is so fortunate. AFSCME Council 93 members and Locals step up year after year to help those in need. From SUMMUP Locals' annual Thanksgiving Food Drive and Christmas Toy Drive in conjunction with the Central Mass Labor Council, Local 298's Load the Loader Toy Drive, Council 93's own efforts to help organizations in the Greater Boston Area, and the dozens of Locals who help their communities in ways big and small, it is in our nature as union members to help those in need. It is why we do the work that we do!

The 3rd Annual AFSCME Council 93 Toy Drive, spearheaded by Director of Field Services and Organizing Eddie Nastari, was once again a huge success thanks to the generosity of our Locals, members, staff, and supporters. On December 17th, Council 93 delivered several truckloads of toys and gifts for dozens of children at the Crossroads Family Shelter in East Boston. This year Council 93 also partnered with Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, the Boston Housing Authority, and Boston Center for Youth and Families (BCYF) to bring over three hundred toys to the BCYF Menino Center in Roslindale to spread holiday cheer to those less fortunate. Over \$10,000 was raised thanks to donations from Locals 24, 72, 651, 700, 783, 804, 944, 1114, 2525, 3485, 3967, Regan and Associates, individual members, and staff to spread holiday cheer to those in need.

Local 298, which represents workers in departments across the City of Manchester, NH, held their first Load the Loader Toy Driver last month. Working with the city's Welfare Department and the Health Department's Public Health and Safety Team and Healthy Start programs, Local 298 was able to identify Manchester families who were struggling and made donations directly to families in their community. For nearly twenty years, SUMMUP Locals have worked with the Central Massachusetts Labor Council at Thanksgiving and Christmas, hosting both a food drive and toy drive. This year they went above and beyond with thousands of dollars of food, toys, and monetary donations to help families across Central Massachusetts.

The tremendous generosity of AFSCME Council 93 Locals, individual members, staff, and partners who made donations of time, gifts, and funds helped to ensure that dozens of families would have their needs met this holiday season.



Top: Local 445 President Xavier Mathurin, Local 1892 President Taylor Phan, Local 296 President Delores Donaldson, and Council 93 and Local 1631 President Chris 'Tiger' Stockbridge, delivering toys at the BCYF Menino Center. Below: Local 298 President and Council 93 Executive Board Member Karen Sutkus delivering toys in a fully loaded Manchester Highway Department front loader.



# **AFSCME Council 93 Spreads Holiday Cheer**







Counter Clockwise from Top Left: a child at the Crossroads Family Shelter receiving her toys; Council 93 Executive Director Mark Bernard, President Chris 'Tiger' Stockbridge, and Director of Field Services and Organizing Eddie Nastari with Crossroads Family Shelter Staff; Toys donated by Local 298 members awaiting pick up; SUMMUP Local leaders at their Thanksgiving Food Drive; Council 93 President Chris 'Tiger' Stockbridge and Boston City Councilor Enrique Pepen at the BCYF Menino Center Toy Drive.





# Hard-Fought New Contract Ratified by Local 1674 Members at Howard Center

**Burlington, VT-** In a major victory for workers, AFSCME Local 1674 members at the Howard Center ratified a new three-year contract this past Fall.

After months of difficult negotiations—some of the most challenging faced by any bargaining unit in Council 93 —this agreement marks a significant achievement, and most notably, it was reached without a strike.

The biggest win of this contract is the end of the 40-year right-to-work era at the Howard Center. Through a combination of picketing, open bargaining, and maintaining transparency throughout the process, the bargaining team succeeded in pushing the employer to accept Fair Share (Agency Fee) provisions for new hires. This is a major shift after decades of resistance from the employer. While the Fair Share language is not flawless, it represents a massive step forward in securing union rights. The bargaining team also reduced by half the amount of time allowed for members to drop their union membership and successfully preserved one hour of New Employee Orientation time.

Beyond these union-strengthening measures, the contract also makes significant strides in wages and benefits. The agreement includes a 3.3% wage increase in the first year, surpassing inflation and achieving the bargaining committee's goal of a pay boost above the cost of living. By the end of the contract, the lowest-paid workers will earn \$20.52/ hour, more than double what they earned a decade ago. Additionally, the bargaining team secured substantial increases to shift differentials: the weekend differential rises from \$0.44/hour to \$1.00/hour, the evening differential from \$0.65/ hour to \$2.00/hour, and the overnight



Local 1674 members last summer at one of their many Honk and Wave actions to demand a fair contract.

differential from \$2.10/hour to \$3.00/hour. Other key provisions include the extension of car damage coverage caused by clients, stable healthcare coverage in year one, and a successful fight against management's proposal to create a two-tiered time-off system.

Congratulations to bargaining team members Andy Blanchet, Nolan Rampy, John Williams, and Dan Peyser. Their hard work, strategic thinking, and determination have secured significant wins and ensured the future strength of the union.



Executive Director Mark Bernard and SUMMUP President and Executive Board Member Kelly Abreu at SUMMUP's December meeting.

#### Local 1818 Members Ratify New Contract with Active Member Participation in Negotiations From extreme heat, overtime benefits, and expanded funeral leave. Notably, there we concessions on existing contractual benefits



**Salem, MA-** Members of AFSCME Local 1818, representing about 85 city workers in Salem, unanimously ratified a new three-year contract that delivers substantial wins for workers.

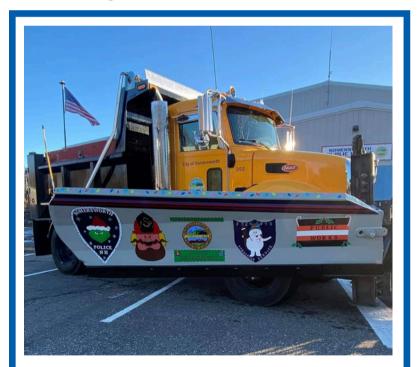
The Local's bargaining strategy involved an innovative approach of open bargaining, where all union members could participate as "silent representatives" during negotiation sessions, ensuring transparency and a sense of collective ownership throughout the process.

Local 1818 Recording Secretary and Negotiating Team member Sarah Sosnowski highlighted the significance of the open bargaining approach, stating, "Having open negotiations this time around was a huge game changer for us. Our members were fully engaged, able to track progress, and see firsthand how things evolved from one session to the next." The active involvement of the membership played a pivotal role in the union's success.

The new contract includes an average raise of 17.6% over three years, a landmark achievement for the Local. Additionally, members secured six weeks of paid parental leave, improved language on job posting and bidding, enhanced protections from extreme heat, overtime benefits, and expanded funeral leave. Notably, there were no concessions on existing contractual benefits. "We didn't give an inch on any of our benefits," Sosnowski said. "Our goal was to reward senior workers while also attracting new employees, and we've opened doors for members who have been held back for too long."

Throughout negotiations the Local maintained strong member involvement with about 25 members attending each session. The team's dedication and transparent communication built greater solidarity and support within the union, marking a transformative moment in their bargaining power.

This victory showcases the power of collective action and strategic planning, ensuring the Local's future strength.



For the last several years, Local 863 President Roy Remick has helped bring some cheer to his community by leading a program to decorate the town's snowplows with help from residents, students, and other Somersworth Town Departments. This year's plow designs feature a scene from the iconic "A Charlie Brown Christmas" cartoon and another depicting symbols from the City's various departments including police, fire, and public works.

#### Local 1201 Secures New Five-Year Contract



**Rutland, VT-** On November 14th, members of Local 1201 in Rutland unanimously ratified a groundbreaking five-year contract with a decisive 38-0 vote. As Council 93's oldest unit in Vermont, organized in the 1950s, this new agreement establishes the strongest union contract in the state's history.

The success of these negotiations was bolstered by the Local's strategic political engagement. Last year, Local 1201 endorsed Michael Doengas in his underdog campaign for Mayor. Since his election, Mayor Doengas has demonstrated a strong commitment to labor. Not only did he negotiate a fair contract, but he also resolved longstanding grievances and an Unfair Labor Practice (ULP) by removing anti-union officials. The Mayor replaced the City Clerk with a Local 1201 Steward and appointed a former union member to lead the Department of Public Works.

The new contract secures significant gains for union members, including a 15% wage increase over the life of the agreement and the introduction of a consolidated Step system that promotes gender equity between City Hall and DPW employees. Workers at City Hall will also receive a new clothing allowance and guaranteed access to a break area, ensuring parity with DPW workers. Other provisions include increased shift differentials, bonuses for off-hours work, and the preservation of health care benefits.

Congratulations to Local 1201 President Tom Franzoni and the entire the bargaining team for this landmark achievement. This victory underscores a vital truth: *politics matter!* 

WELCOME Over the units h

Over the past several months a number of new units have ratified their FIRST UNION CONTRACTS. Welcome to AFSCME Council 93!

- Holyoke, MA Professionals
- Boston Public School Lunch Monitors
- Wakefield, MA Housing Authority
- North Andover, MA Cafeteria Workers
- Beverly, MA Crossing Guards

- Westford, MA Cafeteria Workers
- Fairfield, ME School Department
- Easthampton, MA Professionals
- Easthampton, MA Clerks
- Easthampton, MA Custodians

# Maine Mental Health Workers Secure Investigation into Dangerous Conditions

Augusta, ME- Council 93 has been working with the Maine AFL-CIO to prioritize safety for staff at Riverview and Dorothea Dix, Maine's state mental health facilities.

This follows the Maine Legislature's failure to fund legislation reducing the minimum retirement age for these workers by seven years —a measure aimed at addressing the challenges these employees face daily.

With support from former Senate President Troy Jackson, State Senator Mike Tipping, and State Representative Raegan Larochelle, we pushed for an investigative hearing to expose the dangerous work environment. On October 15th, the Legislature's Joint Committee on Government Oversight unanimously voted to direct the Office of Program Evaluation and Government Accountability (OPEGA) to launch a comprehensive investigation into both facilities. OPEGA, an independent, non-partisan office with broad investigatory powers, can confidentially interview state workers. The investigation is expected to span several months and will provide a critical look at conditions in these facilities.

The findings will guide our efforts to secure meaningful reforms, including improved retirement benefits, solutions to recruitment and retention challenges, reduced reliance on contract workers, and, above all, a safer work environment.

We are committed to using this opportunity to drive legislative action that recognizes and protects the essential work of Maine's mental health care staff. Together, we will fight for a system that values and safeguards its workers.

# **Upcoming Events**



### Boston Locals Hold the Line on Health Insurance Costs



**Boston, MA**- On November 12th, the City of Boston Public Employee Committee (PEC), which negotiates with the City over health insurance benefits for all unionized city employees, signed a two-year extension of the Boston PEC Agreement. This extension ensures continued access to high quality, comprehensive healthcare coverage while holding the line on co-pays, deductibles, plan design changes, and coverage for the next two years.

This is a huge victory for our members in Boston. Congratulations to Council 93 President, Local 1631 President, and Boston Presidents' Committee Co-Chair Chris "Tiger" Stockbridge, as well as Local 1526 President and Boston Public Employee Committee Co-Chair Elissa Cadillic who were part of the PEC negotiating team! Council 93 is growing and adding new members all the time. Here are just some examples of the progress Council 93 is making on the organizing front:

- Middleton, MA Library 15 New Members
- North Shore Physician's Group Physiatry Doctors 5 New Members
- Piscataquis County, ME Jail 3 New Members
- Rockland, MA Waste Water Plant 7 New Members
- Hartford, VT Municipal Employees 10 New Members
- Salem, MA Hospital Physician's Assistants 18 New Members

Joining Council 93 starts with a conversation - to learn more contact our Organizing Staff at <u>info@afscme93.org</u>

# Council 93 Member Benefit: Homeowners Insurance

### Use your AFSCME Union Card to Save!

Choose the right homeowners insurance for you and your family.

Union Plus is proud to introduce this opportunity for union members to access discounted homeowners insurance from Farmers Insurance Choice.



**Council** 93

Organizing

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