

# Thousands of state workers forced to pay union fees

## Many workers upset about new charges

By [Julie Bykowitz](#), The Baltimore Sun

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Maryland's largest state employee union is set to begin collecting fees from nonmembers this month — a move that sets up the Maryland chapter of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees for what could be a \$4.7 million gain over the fiscal year.

AFSCME sees the additional money as a matter of fairness, since the union negotiates contracts with the state on behalf of all its bargaining members, though fewer than half pay dues. Union officials say the extra money will allow them to improve services.

But some of the 12,500 state workers who will find as much as a \$389 bite out of their annual pay criticize the new fees.

"People like me, I don't have a lot of faith in unions," said Michael White, who works for the Motor Vehicle Administration in Glen Burnie.

The fees — which will also be collected by smaller unions such as the American Federation of Teachers — are allowed under The Fair Share Act, which the state legislature passed in 2009 largely on a party-line vote. Gov. Martin O'Malley, a pro-labor Democrat who benefited from strong union support in his re-election bid last year, had pushed the measure.

AFSCME Maryland represents 21,000 workers in collective bargaining with the state, but only 8,000 are dues-paying members. Another 4,000 workers not represented by AFSCME in contract negotiations pay dues to the union anyway, to tap benefits such as grievance representation.

"It's very exciting," said Sue Esty, AFSCME Maryland's assistant director. She has been with the organization for two decades. "We've always had a problem providing adequate service to our members because we have been so underfunded. This empowers employees."

The union brings in about \$4.7 million per year in dues, an amount that is likely to double under the new fee structure.

Maryland joins the District of Columbia and at least 22 other states, including Pennsylvania and Delaware, in allowing state employee unions to collect such service fees.

Beginning in mid-July, employees represented by AFSCME will have an amount between \$10.80 and \$14.96 deducted automatically from their biweekly paychecks.

AFSCME officials say they did not implement the fee structure last year because employees were saddled with pay freezes and unpaid days off. Republican lawmakers see another motive in the timing: O'Malley was up for re-election last year, and the new fee could have angered thousands of potential voters.

"This is the year for political payoffs," said Del. Warren Miller, a Howard County Republican.

AFSCME notified employees about the fees this spring, and has held workshops and town hall meetings across the state. A letter from AFSCME Maryland director Patrick Moran says that "the jobs, benefits and professional reputation of state employees have come under attack in recent months" — things the union will defend.

Hundreds of state workers have objected to the new fees, which some argue could force smaller unions out of existence. Maryland Classified Employees Association officials testified against the bill, pointing out that state workers who belong to MCEA but are in AFSCME bargaining units will be forced to pay two sets of union dues. Many of them, they predicted, would drop out of MCEA.

White, the MVA worker, said he takes his customer service job seriously and believes pay should reflect an employee's work ethic rather than everyone being given "an arbitrary raise." He said he understands the argument that AFSCME negotiates on his behalf but would have preferred that the union ask for a donation, rather than requiring a fee.

Del. Gail Bates and other Republican lawmakers say Maryland should be moving to be a more competitive "right to work" state instead of making union membership compulsory.

"To force people to pay to an organization they don't even want to be part of makes no sense," the Howard County lawmaker said, adding that two-thirds of state workers have chosen not to be union members. "This is taking away freedom in the workplace."

Several other unions, including AFT Healthcare-Maryland, which represents roughly 6,000 health care workers and administrative professionals, also will begin collecting fees from nonmembers.

George Myers, president of the AFT's Maryland Professional Employees Council, said some employees have said they are "very upset" by the new system.

"They seem to be saying, 'Why bother now when I've never had to pay for representation?'" he said. "It's human nature, I guess."

AFSCME officials say more than 1,000 employees have recently signed membership

cards.

White is among 610 workers who filed paperwork to be political objectors, meaning they will hand over \$10.80 per biweekly paycheck, compared to \$14.96 paid by union members. Those who have not signed up to be union members but have not objected to the new fee will pay an amount between the two; AFSCME was calculating the exact amount.

About 325 employees also have objected on religious grounds. By law, they'll have to provide documentation showing that they make charitable donations in an amount equal to union dues.

AFSCME says it will use the bulk of the new revenue to hire more staff members — it now has eight — to develop a robust shop steward system and to better monitor labor-management committee meetings.

It appears AFSCME is on track to line its political coffers by at least several hundred thousand dollars per year. Esty says there are no specific plans for spending that money.

AFSCME employees rallied for O'Malley and other politicians during last year's state races. Campaign finance records show that AFSCME Maryland also contributed tens of thousands of dollars to the state Democratic Party and various politicians during the four-year election cycle that ended in December.

The most recent audit, for the fiscal year that ended June 30, 2010, shows the organization spent nearly \$3.3 million, including \$2 million on salaries, employee benefits and payroll taxes. Another \$150,892 went to "communication and education," while \$26,800 was marked "contributions and participations."