

Longtime Union Leader Prepares to Step Back From a Movement Under Threat

Lee Saunders has led the country's top union for local public workers at a time of growing public support and official opposition.



Lee Saunders in his office in Washington, D.C., in May. He's stepping down after 50 years at the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. Credit...Demetrius Freeman for The New York Times



By [Rebecca Davis O'Brien](#)

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Lee Saunders, the president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, traveled to Alaska in March to meet local union leaders pushing to reinstate a pension system for state employees.

Alaska had closed its [public retirement program](#) in 2006, after it ran up a multibillion-dollar shortfall. But 20 years later, state agencies have double-digit vacancy rates, a crisis of public-sector employment that has compromised safety and services.

In April, Alaska's legislature passed a bill that would restart the retirement program with bipartisan support, aiming to draw and retain workers. But Gov. Mike Dunleavy, a Republican, vetoed it in May.

The failure illustrates a tension that came to define Mr. Saunders' tenure as head of the country's largest public employee union. While unions have regained favor with the public, they are facing new opposition from many of the country's leaders.

A 2025 Gallup poll found that 65 percent of Americans approve of labor unions, up from a low of 48 percent in 2009. Over that same time, though, the percentage of American workers in unions has fallen and the power unions wield has been eroded by courts and legislatures. It is a paradox that "reflects our broken political economy," said Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, a political scientist at Columbia University.

"Policy choices have weakened our labor movement," he said.

Few people understand the paradox better than Mr. Saunders, 75, who plans to retire in August after 50 years working for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, or the AFSCME, including 15 years as its leader.



The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees building in Washington. The union has 1.4 million dues-paying members across the country including nurses, clerks, cops and librarians. Credit...Demetrius Freeman for The New York Times

Conservatives have long targeted public-sector unions, which they describe as inefficient, coercive and expensive. Now, some on the American left are also calling public-sector unions barriers to progress and productivity. The so-called abundance agenda, while not explicitly antilabor, has [set off debates](#) about whether Democrats need to learn how to say no to unions that throw up barriers to better train service, faster construction, more housing.

People who worked with Mr. Saunders over the years say he instilled two principles into the union, which may help it as it confronts new challenges.

The first is the power that comes from keeping the tent open to a wide range of political beliefs and professions. Under Mr. Saunders, the union has stepped back from what he called “in-your-face” politics and leaned into working conditions and protections, issues that he said bridged a partisan divide while creating a grass roots base.

“We represent Democrats, Republicans, Independents, conservatives, progressives,” Mr. Saunders said during an interview at his office in Washington. “We’ve got to concentrate on the issues that impact on our members and why they voted to be in the union.”

The second principle is that public services are vital to the fabric of the country, and that the workers who provide them should be treated with respect, a legacy of the union’s role in the civil rights movement.

“The values he holds are clear and understandable, about workers having a seat at the table, a voice at work, and that, in exchange for the work that they do, to be treated in a dignified and a fair manner,” said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, who has known Mr. Saunders since the late 1990s.

Mr. Saunders grew up in Cleveland and joined the AFSCME’s staff in 1978 as a labor economist in Washington. In 2010, he was elected secretary-treasurer. Two years later, he won a [closely fought election](#) to become the union’s president.



Mr. Saunders is greeting union members as they line up to vote on the new leadership at the union’s convention in Los Angeles in 2012. He has been working for 15 years as its leader. Credit...Monica Almeida/The New York Times

Mr. Saunders [took office](#) at a time of crisis for state and municipal workers. The Great Recession had hollowed out municipalities around the country. Tax revenues had plummeted, and states, most of which are legally required to keep a balanced budget, were looking for ways to cut spending.

The downturn “resulted in significant attacks on public workers, our jobs, our benefits, our pay, even what we did,” said Steven Kreisberg, a longtime staff member of the union who retired in 2024.

Republican governors — notably in Wisconsin, where AFSCME was founded — gutted collective bargaining agreements. Conservative donors, think tanks and politicians pushed for privatization of public services, and laws that would hamper public sector unions. In 2018, the Supreme Court ruled that public sector unions could not compel employees to pay dues or “fair-share fees” if they did not want to be part of the union.

“There was a thought this could be the end of public sector unionism,” Mr. Kreisberg said. Instead, it pushed unions to make a case for their relevance.

Mr. Saunders had to manage union leaders who believed the union should not make an effort to serve the workers who did not want to pay dues, even though the union was bound by law to represent nonpaying members in bargaining and other matters.

“I didn’t agree with that,” he said in the interview. “We have to figure out ways not to push them away, but to bring them in.”

Image



Mr. Saunders speaking at a rally denouncing cuts to funding for Head Start and after school programs in 2012. Credit...Michael Appleton for The New York Times

Mr. Saunders had to reckon with another internal division after George Floyd’s murder, when a subset of members called for law-enforcement groups to be banished from the union.

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees is a liberal union, but its political composition can be quite diverse: Its 1.4 million dues-paying members across the country include nurses in Michigan, transportation workers in New York and corrections officers in New Mexico, along with domestic workers, clerks, cops and librarians.

Mr. Saunders thought it would be a mistake to push out the police.

“You’re either going to fight for workers or you aren’t going to fight for workers,” he said. “And your strength comes with the numbers that you have, and the classifications that you represent and people sitting down at that table representing all of those classifications — that’s strength and that’s power.”

Because Mr. Saunders came up through the union’s Washington headquarters, not a local chapter, his critics worried he might lack the workplace experience to lead the union. What Mr. Saunders did have was an understanding of how to [talk to lawmakers, and — his supporters say — the credibility to forge deals](#). Mr. Saunders leveraged his relationships with Democratic leaders to help craft the \$1.9 trillion stimulus package passed in 2021 as the country emerged from the shock of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Negotiating with officials facing revenue shortages is a tough part of the job, he said, but public sector workers know better than anybody where inefficiencies and waste lie in government. He said he had no patience for arguments about unions “standing in the way.”

“If people believe that the way that you can solve the economic problems that exist in this country is to attack the benefits and wages of public sector workers, then they’re living in a planet that I’m not on,” Mr. Saunders said. “Because that’s just not for real.”

Mr. Saunders has picked up on another rising wave of public sentiment that could be more influential in coming elections: Broad public anger at big companies and big tech.

“I am saying point your finger where I believe the blame lays, and that blame is with people that have a bunch of money, want more money, at the expense of working class people across the country,” Mr. Saunders said. “We cannot fall for the ‘divide and conquer’ trap that is being developed here.”

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