

Winning for Workers: IUPAT Members in Political Office

Who are the best people to elect to represent the interests of working people? More and more union members say ... working people.

In IUPAT district councils across the United States, members are campaigning for and winning elected office. According to the AFL-CIO, 2,141 union members held or ran for public office in 2000. Today, more than 3,000 union members hold elected office. General President James Williams believes this is a good trend. "When union members get elected, they understand what is important to the men and women who work beside them," he said. "And labor doesn't have to explain why an issue like prevailing wage or the Employee Free Choice Act is important to a worker; they know."

"I'D RATHER MAKE THE DINNER THAN DO THE DISHES."

That is how IUPAT Government Affairs Director Tim Stricker explains the importance of union members winning office. "Instead of counting on someone else all the time, we are part of the actual process, and that delivers much more for our members."

Stricker travels to district councils to educate members on the importance of being politically active, what it takes to run for office, the rewards of serving, and the time commitment it takes to hold office. Participation as a constituent is a first step. Going to local government meetings gives members a first-hand look at what it takes to serve in office and is a good starting point. For example, one IUPAT member in the Philadelphia area addressed his city council in support of a responsible contracting bill so effectively that the local Democratic party approached him about running for office.

"I WANT TO DO WHAT I CAN TO MAKE A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE."

Bronson Frye, an organizer for Anchorage, Alaska, Local #1959, was appointed this year to serve on the city's Housing and Neighborhood Development Commission, which advises city government on housing and community development needs in lower-income and at-risk neighborhoods. "The best way to protect our work is for members to get involved in the political process," he said. "It's an opportunity to gather information and stay involved."

Frye campaigned last year in a Democratic primary for state representative, and won. Although he didn't take the seat, he learned that campaigning "allows you to meet other office-holders and educate yourself on the political process." During the campaign, he struck up a friendship with then-mayor of Anchorage, now U.S. Senator, Mark Begich.

As Frye became more active in the union, he saw that politics affected working people's lives. "Running for office became the greatest experience of my life," he said. He urges fellow workers to get involved, vote, and "get elected—you will make a difference to the people you are working beside."

"THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO LISTEN WHEN YOU COME TO THEM AS A CITY OFFICIAL."

That is what DC 82 member Scott Parker, who has served as a city council member in Mazeppa, Minn., for 15 years, says about talking to other public officials in Minnesota. Mazeppa may be small—population 778—but state and federal elected office-holders pay more attention to what Parker has to say because he's an elected official, too.

Parker says his union background helped him take on the city council position: Having held most leadership positions in his local, he had "learned how to get up in front of people, get comfortable with taking a leadership role—running meetings, answering questions."

Why did he choose to run for the first time? "Stuff was always talked about, but nothing was ever done," Parker recalled. "Ideas kept falling on deaf ears." He wanted to be someone who made things change. And the voters liked having Parker on the council:

Working on the campaign trail are (left to right) Alaska Local 1959 Business Manager Chris Gregg, U.S. Senator Mark Begich, and union member and political candidate Bronson Frye.



When he needed a break from the office and didn't put his name on the ballot, he won anyway—the voters wrote him in.

Everyone on city council knows that Parker is a union person. He has been fighting for union contractors in the bidding process. "I see jobs going to the lowest non-union bidder, and people say we have to do it," because of state law language requiring acceptance of the lowest responsible bid. But Parker did his research, and knows the state took the high bid for reconstruction of the I-35 bridge, for instance. Now, when the issue of accepting a low bid comes up, Parker can say, "That's not what the state did."

When asked what he'd say to a member thinking about running for office, Parker says, "I'd love to see members run for office and I'd do anything I could to help them. If they need me to go door-knocking, I'd be there."

"YOU REALLY HAVE TO GIVE IT YOUR ALL."

That is what DC 9 Political Director Jack Kittle told fellow member Elizabeth Crowley about running for public office in 2001. She started with a run for city council that year, and won the primary but lost the general election. In 2008, the incumbent resigned and a special election was called. That June, Crowley lost a four-way race by only 38 votes, but advanced to November's the general election. Today, she is the newly elected New York City 30th District Councilwoman for Queens, N.Y.

Before running for office, Crowley learned about the importance of politics to working families by being active on her district's Political Action Committee "I liked learning how politics affect policy" and that, through policies like prevailing wages, and health and safety regulations, "government can demand respect for workers and their labor," she recalled. Standing up for workers is important to her: "You can do so much for so many."

Crowley feels that unions should be involved in government at every level. "You see and get an understanding of what is going on in the community," even when serving at lower levels, such as boards or commissions. "This is particularly helpful for the building trades, because you often can learn about construction planned in your neighborhood," she said.

Union members running for office is "good for the union and good for the community," Crowley said. The first step is getting involved. "Get involved with other organizations, so people can see your dedication and investment in the community," she suggested. "You start by being active at the neighborhood level and work your way up to higher office."

GETTING INVOLVED

IUPAT members interested in running for political office can check with their district offices for advice and support.

When a district council supports a member's run for office, the International provides support for the campaign. Here's how.

- Where law allows, we solicit every U.S. district council for financial support.
- We ship in IUPAT staff for the last two weeks of a campaign, to help get out the vote.
- We work with the local and state political party to ensure their support for our candidate.
- Our regional political directors are available to help at every step of the campaign.

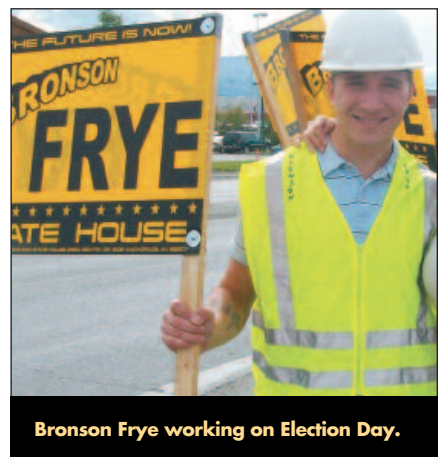
There are challenges and rewards in running for office. "This work—having a voice and making the rules—is important to our members," said Stricker. "My dream is to have a member work through the political ranks and be elected to Congress."



Scott Parker with an election yard sign.



Crowley is sworn in as a New York City councilwoman.



Bronson Frye working on Election Day.