

# Local 1668 Campaign Nips Privatization in the Bud

*Kalamazoo MI* — When the leadership of AFSCME Local 1668, Western Michigan University employees, learned that the University was considering privatizing one-third of the bargaining unit, the Local Union immediately launched an intensive anti-privatization - and five weeks later, the University called off their plans.

Local 1668 represents about 480 workers at the University, including 150 or more in Dining Services and Recreational Sports - the jobs University management had targeted for privatization.

When the Local leaders learned of the University's plan, ARAMARK had already toured the facilities, and both ARAMARK and another contractor were reportedly preparing to bid, once Requests For Proposals (RFPs) were issued.

"When it comes to privatization, we are all in the same situation. It seems like every few years we are faced with losing some good jobs on campus," observed Local 1668 Vice President Willie Dean.

"Many members are single parents; we have grandparents raising grandkids or have family members with disabilities. It is very stressful trying to work every day, not knowing if you are going to have employment from one day to the next. Many of us have spent many years working on this campus," Dean concluded.

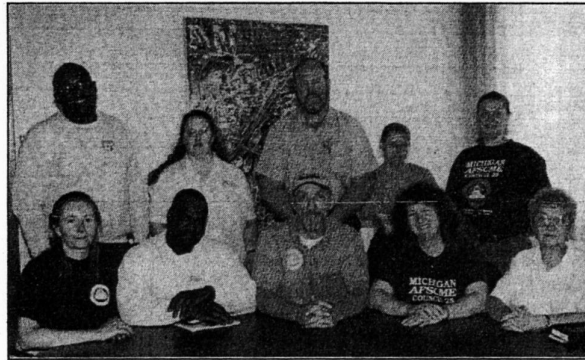
Local 1668 was prepared to fight back. Armed with information and strategies from anti-privatization seminars presented by Council 25, and from workshops and reports during meetings of Council 25's Colleges and Universities Coordinating Committee, the Local went to work.

"We responded by going to the organizations we had networked with in the past and asked them to send letters of support for us to the University President, Vice President and Board of Trustees," related Local 1668 President Jack Roach.

"By attending events they were sponsoring, we strengthened these existing coalitions. We were able to get letters from several student organizations on campus as well as support from



(from left) WMU President Elson Floyd, Local 1668 President Jack Roach, Local 1668 PEOPLE Co-Chair Timothy Birch, Local 1668 Chief Steward Stacie Dineen, and WMU Vice President (Business and Finance) Robert Beam. Photo courtesy of Local 1668.



AFSCME Local 1668 Executive Board (seated, from left) Recording Secretary Kristin Gustafson, Vice President Willie Dean, President Jack Roach, Chief Steward Stacie Dineen, Financial Secretary Alice Krepel. (standing, from left) Sergeant at Arms Richard Nabors, Executive Board Members Merrion Mader, Kevin Villadsen, Bonnita Kibby, Patricia Campbell. Photo courtesy of Local 1668.

many community groups," continued Roach. "We also reached out to 'new' groups, speaking with the student government, NAACP and the League of Women Voters.

"We educated our stewards and members who interact with students on a daily basis, especially those working in the cafeterias. We were able to reach the student population before management made a public announcement that privatization was being considered," Roach explained with a smile. "Our message that services would be reduced was heard before management could start in with their

'we're cutting costs and saving taxpayer dollars' mantra."

Local leaders and activists attended the Michigan Democratic Caucuses in multiple counties and contacted our elected officials. State Representative Ed LaForge and City Commissioner Dan Cooney were particularly supportive.

The Local purchased anti-privatization buttons, prepared picket signs, and sent letters to the editors of campus and community publications.

In one of these letters to the editor, Rebecca Roberts, a Millwright in the Trades Department at WMU, put it this way:

"Eliminating the current dining services will mean lower quality food, no continuous service, and no long term employees who genuinely know and care about students. Will these actions reduce the costs for students or improve the service provided in any way? I don't think so."

Internet chat rooms provided an opportunity for Local leaders to sample student opinion on the proposed privatization - and students were generally not in favor of the scheme.

The Local brought a cameraperson from the community Cable Access Center to the campus, to videotape members at work, and to interview workers on the job. The projected video helped to shift the balance, even before editing was completed. University management quickly went from discussing potential discipline against those involved to apprehension over the content of the video, and its possible impact in the community.

Representative LaForge scheduled a meeting with University President Elson Floyd on March 20.

On March 21, WMU Vice President for Finance Robert Beam called a meeting with the Local 1668 Executive Board and announced, "Effective immediately, the University is no longer considering privatizing any AFSCME work." Two days later, he confirmed this in a letter to Roach, and in a second letter to "WMU Staff Members," in which he stated, "I recognize that each and every one of you has a personal interest in continuing to be members of the University community. I recognize that the University's investigation into privatizing parts of our operation has caused you a great deal of apprehension. If the University continues down this path right now, I fear that the relationship between staff members and the University may be damaged beyond repair."

Local 1668 has been nominated for an AFSCME "Public Service Heroes" award for combating privatization, and at press date, has been identified as a finalist. The Awards will be announced at the AFSCME International Convention, June 26 - 30, in Philadelphia.