

WEEK IN ACTION!

Weekly News From Your Union ~ September 15, 2014 – September 19, 2014

VSEA State Housing Authority Unit Reaches Tentative Agreement!

Representatives of the VSEA State Housing Authority Bargaining Unit Team announced late last week that a tentative contract agreement has been reached with the Authority. The Team met with VSHA workers on September 18 to explain the tentative agreement and announce that ballots are going in the mail soon. *WIA* will let readers know the results of the vote when they are made available.

If the VSHA workers ratify their contract, it will mean VSEA members are eight-for-eight this year in terms of negotiating new contracts, without the use of a mediator.

Retirement Board Seeks Alternate

At the union's Annual Meeting on September 13, VSEA members Tom Hango and Jeff Briggs were elected to serve as the union's representatives to the Vermont State Retirement Board. Hango was serving as VSEA's alternate to this Board, so his election to one of VSEA's two, full-time seats has created a need to now fill the alternate seat.

If you are interested in serving as VSEA's alternate to the Vermont State Retirement Board, please submit a letter of intent to the VSEA Elections Committee no later than Friday, October 17, 2014. You should send an email to Mary Poulos at VSEA (mpoulos@vsea.org), or mail your letter to:

VSEA Elections Committee
c/o Mary Poulos
VSEA Headquarters
155 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05602

Special Note: VSEA asks that interested candidates consider if they really have the ability to dedicate the time needed to fulfill the role of this position. For more information about the position, please contact Ray Stout at VSEA HQ, 223-5247. If you cannot ensure your attendance at the Retirement Board meetings, and fulfill the other requirements (including outside reading, conference calls, workshops, etc.), you may want to reconsider applying for this role.

Council Screens “Wisconsin Rising” & Hears Message From Sen. Sanders

VSEA First Vice President Michelle Salvador provided the Council with a full day of education and strategizing on Friday, September 12.

The Council meeting began with a screening of Vermont filmmaker Sam Mayfield's terrific new film “Wisconsin Rising,” which chronicles how working Wisconsinites fought back against a proposal by Gov. Scott Walker to end collective bargaining rights for public employees (except police and firefighters; many of whom the film shows coming to the Wisconsin capital to support their non-exempted brothers and sisters). The film and the filmmaker received a standing ovation from the Council, and Mayfield allowed questions from the audience, which produced some very healthy discussion about the issues confronting all of America's public-sector workers and how workers can effectively fight back.

“Sam is an amazing filmmaker with an equally amazing message,” Salvador tells *WIA*. “There are a lot of lessons to be learned from Wisconsin; the most important of which is that if it can happen in an alleged

‘blue state’ like Wisconsin then it could happen anywhere, including Vermont. We have to always be on guard and engaged.”

The Council also heard a videotaped message of thanks and support from Sen. Bernie Sanders, who reminded Council members about the many negative forces working against America’s middle class and applauded VSEA members for remaining strong and continuing to fight back hard against powerful anti-worker forces. Sanders also praised VSEA’s drive at UVM to organize clerical, technical, and specialized staff, and he welcomed Steve Howard to his new position as executive director.

“Senator Sanders wanted to be with the Council on Friday, but unfortunately he had another obligation,” explains Salvador. “But he was kind enough to send a video message and a representative from his office to our meeting. Needless to say, there was a lot of love in the room for Bernie and his message.”

VSEA 2014 Annual Meeting Re-Cap

More than 150 VSEA members filled a meeting room at the Killington Grand Resort Hotel on September 13 to conduct the union’s business for the coming fiscal year. The day began with members of VSEA’s various Units meeting together to conduct their own internal Unit business, which includes things like passing or defeating parochial bylaw changes, electing new officers, bargaining updates, etc. After breaking out of these smaller sessions, Unit members returned to the main Annual Meeting room to hear the gavel bang, signaling the beginning of the official meeting.

VSEA President Shelley Martin welcomed members to the Annual Meeting and delivered a report on her activities over the past year. Some of the things she highlighted included meeting often with State officials on worksite issues related to lack of staff, too large caseloads, safety and health, the use of temps and private contractors, retaliation and harassment and contract enforcement. Martin also touched on her efforts to visit more worksites personally to talk face-to-face with frontline employees and her desire to begin asking members with specialized interests to take the point for the union on issues like global climate change, global and national economics and, of course, threats and challenges to labor. She summarized how VSEA retirees worked hard to ensure that an EGWP prescription drug plan adopted earlier this year was fair and contained no surprises, and she thanked all VSEA retirees for their help. Martin ended by urging members to continue sharing their cost-savings ideas with VSEA, reminding that Vermont is staring at another large budget deficit and the time is now to begin collecting ways to save the state money. She also asked members to continue educating lawmakers and community members at-large about the essential services being provided daily by VSEA members. Members with cost-savings ideas can send them to VSEA at vsea@vsea.org. Please put “cost-savings’ idea” in the email subject line.

VSEA Treasurer Sheila Coniff was next on the agenda, and she formally presented the union’s proposed budget for FY2015. There were some questions from members about certain line items, but after clarification was provided by the Treasurer, VSEA Operations Director Ray Stout and Fiscal Coordinator Amy Haskins, the budget passed easily.

An election to fill two seats on the Vermont State Retirement Board was then conducted on the Annual Meeting floor. Three members were nominated, and after the votes were count, Tom Hango and Jeff Briggs were elected to the posts. Nominations are now being taken to fill Board “alternate” post, which had been held by Hango (see *WIA* entry below).

At the meeting's luncheon, VSEA Special Events Committee Chair Janis Henderson announced the winners of the union's annual awards to recognize members, staff and a Chapter doing notable work. This year's winners were:

The Frank Mazza Award - Presented to a VSEA member whose time and efforts are helping VSEA achieve its primary goal of better wages, benefits and working conditions for all state employees.

Winner: **Dave Bellini**, 36-year DOC employee, who nominators referred to as an "exemplary" and "tireless" advocate.

The Terry Macaig Award - Presented annually to a VSEA member for their outstanding contributions or actions that directly or indirectly promote the positive image of VSEA and/or public employees.

Winner: **John Howe**, 18-year Vocational Rehab employee, who was acknowledged by those nominating him for his courage under fire and his unwavering commitment to achieve justice for all state employees—even in the face of his own possible termination.

Chapter of the Year – Presented annually to a VSEA Chapter that has demonstrated excellence in member participation, activism and organizing to achieve VSEA's goals.

Winner: **St. Johnsbury/NEK Chapter**, which was acknowledged for "rebuilding and re-energizing," conducting community food drives and improved member outreach.

Steward of the Year – Presented annually to a VSEA Chapter that has demonstrated excellence in member participation, activism and organizing to achieve VSEA's goals.

Winner: **Deb Franks**, 7-year BGS employee, who was acknowledged as a "real activist" and an excellent worksite leader who makes it her mission to sign up new employees as soon as they begin employment.

The Linda Coan Award – Presented to honor one particular VSEA staff person's dedication and service to VSEA and its membership.

Winner: **Adam Norton**, Strategic Analyst, who was acknowledged for his "grasp of the facts" and "solid analysis" and for being "a great advocate for VSEA members and for social and economic justice."

Following lunch, there was a spirited discussion around the adoption of a host of bylaw changes that were drafted by the VSEA Bylaws Committee and approved by the Council. In the end, however, a motion was made from the floor to table all the bylaw proposals, pending further member education and outreach about the proposals. The motion passed and the VSEA Board, Bylaws Committee and others will be meeting soon to determine how to proceed going forward, given the vote to table. *WIA* will keep you updated.

The meeting was declared "open" for the next hour, as the State's top official addressed members, praising the cooperation that led to seven new contracts without mediation, promising help on temporary employees and pledging his opposition to privatizing the Vermont Veterans' Home. He also told members that any new health care system for Vermont would not be done "at the expense of our state employee workforce," and that he was disappointed paid sick days for all was not passed in the last legislative session.

After the remarks, the bylaws discussion was formally concluded, and VSEA's Organizing Team was then invited to provide an overview of the union's drive to represent clerical, technical, and specialized staff at UVM. The Team presented a condensed version of a comprehensive presentation it delivered to the Council the day before, which included how we got to where we are today, how VSEA members are helping, what the campaign's current status is, what needs to happen prior to filing for an election—and after, where the campaign is strong and not so strong, UVM's external and internal economic realities and what help is needed from VSEA members in the coming weeks.

Old business and new business were discussed, and President Martin then opened the floor to a “town hall” style meeting, where members could talk about what's on their mind, what's going on in their worksite, improvements they would like to see, etc.

The town hall meeting concluded and the 2014 VSEA Annual Meeting was adjourned.

“I really want to thank the Special Events Committee for all its hard work to plan and then host this very special Annual Meeting,” President Martin told *WIA*. “This was a special year because VSEA is commemorating seventy years of protecting and advocating for Vermont state employees and the committee really put together a nice celebration in a lovely venue.”

Note: Annual Meeting photos can be found

Annual Meeting Features First-Ever “Presidential Awards”

In addition to the traditional VSEA awards presented during the Annual Meeting luncheon, President Martin decided this year to begin presenting a new set of awards to members that she's calling the “Presidential Awards for Excellence Beyond the Call of Duty.” This year's recipients were:

Bonnie Kynoch – Defender General's Office
Deb Franks – Buildings & General Services
John Howe – Vocational Rehabilitation
Laurette Edmunds – Parole and Probation
Rachael Fields – Vermont Veterans' Home
Ruth Leithead – Retired, Vermont State Hospital

“These were all very deserving recipients, and I can't tell you how much I admire and appreciate their dedication to VSEA and to their colleagues and the Vermonters they serve, or did serve,” said Martin.

VSEA Thanks Annual Meeting Sponsors

This year VSEA's 70th Annual Meeting was sponsored, in part, by businesses that work with VSEA on special recruitment events, discount programs and other member services.

Exhibit tables were set up near the hotel's meeting rooms so VSEA Members could stop by to learn more about special programs and discounts.

Please show your support to these businesses that support VSEA:

- R.K. Tongue Insurance/VSEA Insurance Program
- Great West
- Liberty Mutual
- NE Delta Dental
- Blue Cross and Blue Shield
- Vermont State Employees' Credit Union

- Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

Is Your Office Freezing? File A BRIN Report!

Faced with the inevitable reality that freezing temperatures sometimes mean freezing offices, VSEA is asking members to share the following negotiated policy with your colleagues:

Vermont Policy Governing Air Quality & Temperature

The State will respond promptly to complaints about air quality in existing State-owned and leased buildings, including air testing when appropriate. The State will consider reasonable corrective measures when indoor workplace temperatures are less than sixty-five (65) degrees or more than eighty-five (85) degrees. Air quality standards for newly constructed or newly leased buildings shall be subject for consideration/recommendation by the Safety and Health Maintenance Committee.

If your office temperature is less than 65 degrees, let the State know immediately by filing a Building Related Issue Notification Form, or BRIN Form, which can be found here: bit.ly/1uOJiS1. Members are also urged to contact your agency's or department's Human Resources' contact.

Brattleboro Reformer Features Story About VSEA Member Saving Bald Eagle's Life

Two weeks after picking up a very ill bald eagle from the banks of the Connecticut River, VSEA member and Senior Game Warden Kelly Price was back at the same spot to release a now healthy bird back into the wild.

According to a September 16 story in the *Brattleboro Reformer*, Price received two calls about a sick bird on September 2 and climbed into his kayak to go and find it, which he did. With the little energy the bird had, it tried to avoid Price, but it was so weak that it didn't make it far and he was able to get it into his boat and take it to a local veterinarian.

"There was no miraculous recovery. It was a very slow process," Price told the paper. "I think it was botulism (a rare paralytic illness caused by bacteria). [Eagles] will eat dead things. They don't just catch fresh fish. ... I think it ingested something and it was not being digested properly; it builds up a toxin, that's what botulism does to people."

After healing, the eagle provided Price and his co-workers with an added bonus on September 15 after they released it back into the wild. Just a few minutes after being released, the eagle was greeted mid-air by what Price believes was the ill bird's mate. A few minutes after that, Price says another eagle he believes is family joined the group to welcome the ill eagle back.

"I'll bet you dollars to doughnuts it is [a family reunion of sorts]," said Price. "That's a bonus."

New Study Confirms That Some Are Enjoying Economic Recovery...Unfortunately, It's The 1%

[A web post this week](#) by Gregory N. Heires summarizes the findings of the recently published triennial Survey of Consumer Finances by the Federal Reserve Board, which confirms that the only Americans benefitting right now in the nation's economic recovery are the wealthiest of the wealthiest.

The survey found:

- **Widespread Income Loss** – "Except for the top 20 percent, all families experienced a drop in median income from 2010 to 2013, the years covered by the report. Only families at the very

top of income distribution saw widespread gains during that period. Families at the bottom of the income distribution “saw substantial declines in average incomes, continuing the trend observed between the 2007 and 2010 surveys.” Americans are chipping away at their debt, but they are cutting back on spending, which can’t be good for the economy.

- **Retirement Insecurity Continues To Decline** – “With employers failing to offer and continuing to drop traditional retirement plans, the participation of families in the bottom half of the income distribution has declined substantially from 2007 to 2013. In 2013, only 40.2 percent of families actually participated in a retirement plans. That’s down from 48.2 percent in 2007. The typical combined balance of Individual Retirement Account and defined-benefit pension for the lowest-income group with those assets was \$39,100 in 2013. The average balance for the upper-middle group was \$147,300. The ownership of retirement savings accounts dipped below 50 percent in 2013. These accounts include IRAs, Keogh accounts, and certain employer-sponsored accounts, such as 401(k)s, 403(b)s and thrift savings accounts. The report documents how lousy these retirement vehicles are. The average account had \$201,300 in 2013. Half of account holders had \$59,000 or less. Try living off that. The report notes that, ‘the shares of income and wealth held by affluent families are at modern historical highs.’ And among high-income groups considerable inequality exists.”
- **Increasing Inequality** – “The income share of the top 3 percent amounted to 30.5 percent in 2013, with this group recovering the hit it took during the Great Recession. But the share of income received by the next highest group (percentiles 90 through 97) has not budged for a quarter of a century, amounting to just less than 17 percent in 1989 and 2013. The ‘rising income share of the top 3 percent mirrors the declining share of the bottom 90 percent in distribution,’ the report says. Translation: Productivity is not shared equally, and inequality reflects a direct transfer of income and wealth to the 1 percent from the rest of us.”
- **The Wealth Divide** - The bottom 90 percent of families has seen its share of wealth plummet to 24.7 percent in 2013 from 33.2 percent in 1989. The median net worth of all families fell by 2 percent to \$81,200 from 2010 to 2013 while the mean (overall average) net worth—propped up by the gains of the affluent—remained at \$534,600.

The author concludes with “...this storyline will continue until the U.S. voters wake up and support a political agenda directed at working families that includes such policies as a national jobs program, redistributive taxes, fair trade policies, labor law reform to promote unionization, a higher minimum wage, the strengthening of Social Security and retirement security, and national health care.”

VSEA Retirees’ Chapter Looking To Fill Vacant Trustee Seat On Executive Committee.

VSEA’s Retirees’ Chapter is looking to fill a Trustee vacancy in District 6, which is Windham and Windsor Counties. Former District 6 Trustee Nancy Robinson was elected VSEA-RC Vice President at the Chapter’s Annual Meeting in August.

All VSEA “lifetime members” whose Chapter dues are current through FY15 are eligible to occupy the seat. To express interest, please email Retirees’ Chapter President Joanie Maclay at jmaclay@vsea.org.

The deadline to submit your name is October 1, 2014.

Deadline For 2014-15 Sugarbush Passes Is FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 19!

Note: VSEA has met its sign-up goal, and is once again happy to offer members the lowest pass rate possible!

For the eighth straight year, VSEA is pleased to inform you that the VSEA Advantage Discount Program will once again be offering discounted Sugarbush all-mountain (& other) ski passes for the 2014-2015 season. This year, Sugarbush is once again using an online sign-up feature, which went live on August 12. This year's rate will be (15+ VSEA sign-ups) \$749 + 6% tax or (1-14 VSEA sign-ups) \$799 + 6% tax. VSEA has always been able to meet the 15-person limit, but there is no guarantee. Offer is available only to full-fledged VSEA members, meaning those who pay full dues. VSEA will be confirming names and status with Sugarbush representative.

Please share this notice with any VSEA members you know who might be interested in the Sugarbush deal.

A few notes:

- The program is open to full time employees, their spouse, partner in a same sex marriage. It is not meant for a "roommate" situation.
- Youth and child passes maybe purchased only in conjunction with an adult pass and do not count towards the 10/15 minimum.

[Click Here To Go To VSEA Sign-Up Page](#)

Bolton Valley Announces Discounted Season Passes For VSEA Members

For the second year in a row, the VSEA Advantage Discount Program is pleased to offer discounted season passes to the Bolton Valley Ski Resort in Bolton, Vt.

VSEA members who order a pass before October 31, 2014, will receive a \$70 discount off the regular \$569 season pass price, making it just \$499. Like last year, this offer is available only to VSEA members who are currently paying full dues to their union.

The sign-up process is pretty straightforward, but, like last year, in order for a member to view the special VSEA discount promo code ([which can be found by clicking here](#)), you must be a registered user of the VSEA website, which also requires you to be a full dues-paying member.

After acquiring the special VSEA promo code, VSEA members can [go here](#) to place your season pass order.

Follow these instructions to make your purchase:

- Click on "Buy Online" and select pass products, accepting or declining pass protection and adding each product to your cart.
- In the Cart view, click on "Add/Change Guest" to set the pass holder's name and information to each pass product, then click "Proceed to Checkout."

- Enter your Promo Code in the box where it asks for your promo code then click “Apply Code.” The cart should be refreshed and show the discounted corporate pricing.

A 2014-15 Bolton Valley All Access Season Pass includes¹:

- Unlimited alpine skiing and riding
- 100km of Nordic and backcountry skiing
- A 20% discount on rentals, retail shop purchases, group ski and ride lessons, and lodging (includes condos, suites, or hotel rooms)
- Sports Center Membership including access to an indoor heated pool, hot tub, and sauna

BV pricing allows you to build your own family pass. Adult passes are just \$499 and passes for youth 17 and under are just \$159 when purchased with a parent's pass.

If you have any questions, please contact Brad Battin at 802-434-6813 or bbattin@boltonvalley.com

VSEA Wants Member Input On Website Redesign!

In the coming months, VSEA’s Communications team will be devoting time to redesigning the VSEA website, making it cleaner and more user friendly. In advance of sitting down to begin the redesign process, VSEA’s Communications team is asking members to please take a few minutes to complete an online survey about VSEA’s current site and about what members want in a new site. VSEA is also interested in learning what websites appeal to you and why, and what websites aren’t so appealing and why.

To take the VSEA website survey, please [click here](#). Thanks in advance for your participation.

Upcoming Meetings/Events/Holidays:

September 23

AOT Labor/Management – Labor Team ONLY!

VSEA HQ

Montpelier

8:00 a.m.

September 29

NMU Executive Committee Meeting

VSEA HQ

Montpelier

8:00 a.m.

VSEA Member Spotlight

Beginning this issue, *WIA* will periodically be spotlighting VSEA members who are going the extra mile for their union and for their co-workers. If you have a co-worker you'd like to nominate, please send the VSEA member's name, where s/he works and a few reasons why this person is receiving your nomination to VSEA Communications Director Doug Gibson at dgibson@vsea.org.

Deb Franks
BGS Custodian
Montpelier Office

Deb Franks is a strong believer in the power that can be achieved when frontline workers band together to confront a workplace injustice or safety and health issue. She and her co-workers called on that power earlier this year to collectively convince top Buildings and General Services (BGS) management that it needed to adopt a comprehensive statewide protocol to govern mold removal in state office buildings.

“The protocol came about because I once cleaned a building where one of my co-workers told me he was experiencing reoccurring mold, and I knew it had been a problem when I worked there,” explains Franks. “No one would take care of it, so he and I worked together—all the time, talking with other BGS workers—to get the statewide policy implemented. Getting to sit down with management and the higher ups to talk about our mold removal concerns was pretty cool, and they listened to us and did their thing. We felt like we had a real voice.” Franks adds that many BGS workers have already had training on the new protocol, and she says the employees are “all feeling safer at work now.”

Franks is not only doing a great job advocating for her co-workers, she's also made it her personal mission to convert agency-fee payers in her shop to full-fledged VSEA membership. In fact, when Franks became active in VSEA two years ago, just 50 percent of her co-workers were full-fledged members. Today, thanks to Franks, 95% of her co-workers have signed up.

“I would just talk with my co-workers about not letting management walk all over us and I'd explain to them how when we stand together, we have a much stronger voice,” says Franks. “So far, the message has worked. I think there should be someone doing the kind of union work I am in every office across Vermont.” She's not done yet though, saying she still has one member who has not signed up yet. “I'm not done yet,” she laughs.

Franks' VSEA activism doesn't stop at leading campaigns and signing-up members; she's also a union steward, representing her co-workers when they have a potential grievance or want help resolving a workplace issue. This year, Franks' co-workers rewarded her advocacy and leadership by voting her “VSEA Steward of the Year.”

“It floored me,” Franks says modestly. “I never expected it in a million years. I was very honored. It was just wonderful.” She believes she was nominated because she “speaks her mind and isn't afraid.” But, ironically, it was a co-worker's fear that first convinced Franks she needed to get active in VSEA.

“We had a supervisor who was just on this one person all the time,” explains Franks. “Finally, I got sick of how staff was being treated—especially certain ones—and I woke up one morning and said ‘enough.’ I have got to do something, and that’s when I got involved in the union.”

Outside of her VSEA duties, Franks says she loves her work and the “customers” she takes care of daily.

“My ‘customers’ are all very nice, and I enjoy making sure they have a clean work environment,” she says.