

MAPE's Jim Monroe fights the good fight for unions

By: Nancy Crotti June 13, 2012 0

Jim Monroe learned early on how to get along with people on the other side of the political fence. The only Democrat in his family, he had to contend with a conservative father who'd jokingly pull his car up so closely behind Monroe's that no one could see his son's left-leaning bumper stickers.

"The one thing I grew up with was, we could disagree politically," Monroe says in the Southern drawl he acquired from spending part of his childhood in Georgia. "I was never tied to their personal political beliefs."

It was good training for what would become nearly an entire career involved in public employee union leadership. Monroe has been executive director of the Minnesota Association of Professional Employees since 1999 and plans to retire this year.

As a student at Ohio University in Athens, Monroe worked to protect the rights of striking United Mine Workers in neighboring Kentucky when it dawned on him how badly workers could be treated if they were divided. Thus began his dedication to teaching workers that there was strength in numbers.

Monroe moved on to the political arena, working for Gov. John Gilligan in his native Ohio from 1970 to 1974. Stints in Washington, D.C. and Maine working for organizations similar to MAPE led him back to Ohio to head the American Association of Classified School Employees, a group of nonprofessional workers which Monroe says spread from eight to 18 states and had 180,000 members when he left.

After logging 100,000 air miles a year leading that union, Monroe burned out on union activity and switched careers to head a fraternal insurance benefit society, the United Commercial Travelers of America. Under his leadership, the organization built a sales force of 5,000 and over 11 years, and ended up doing business in every state in the



Staff photo: Peter Bartz-Gallagher Jim Monroe, who has served as executive director of the Minnesota Association of Professional Employees since 1999, plans to retire this year.

continental United States.

Monroe then began a consulting business, working with insurance companies and large national brokerages to develop brokers and find sales forces. He logged 200,000 miles in an 18-month period and was exhausted.

After boarding a plane in Los Angeles bound for Ohio, Monroe saw an ad in the Wall Street Journal for a job as executive director of MAPE. "I said, 'This might be interesting,'" he recalls.

Knowing nothing about the union, he applied, only to find out that the board-led group was embroiled in a decertification battle. Monroe wished the group well and told its leaders to get in touch with him after the election. They did, and he moved to Minnesota in May 1999.

"I considered it a real opportunity to do things that really intrigued me," he says. "We've basically, in the time I've been here, totally turned the direction and what we do for the members around."

MAPE is required to represent workers in every county in the state whether or not they elect to fully participate and pay full union dues of \$15.00 a pay period. Those who choose lesser membership pay \$12.85. Monroe jokes that MAPE, which has 475 job classifications, is a union of 13,000 different opinions on everything.

Monroe is leaving the union at a highly contentious time. Republican state legislators introduced more than 100 anti-union bills in the most recent biennium without receiving as much publicity as Gov. Scott Walker's anti-union stance in neighboring Wisconsin.

"Minnesota, under the radar, was really akin to Wisconsin," Monroe says. "Instead of one full frontal attack, it was multiple attacks."

The most blatant was an attempt by Minnesota Republicans to tack a "right-to-work" amendment onto the state constitution. The attempt, which would have stripped public worker unions of collective bargaining rights, failed. Many are predicting its return, especially given Walker's defeat of the attempt to recall him.

"The most dangerous part of right-to-work is job protection," Monroe says.

"If you look at states that have a right-to-work law, their wages are less, the benefits are less, their educational achievement for the entire population is lower ...

"The worst one for me is a higher rate of job-related injuries and deaths," he says. "It's more of a laissez-faire attitude toward working conditions and safety."

The combined events in Minnesota and Wisconsin have lit a fire under MAPE members, according to Monroe.

"I've seen a more involved questioning, voluntary contacting of legislators than I've seen in many years by our members," he says. "I know it's happening within AFSCME, within other unions in our state. ... I do believe that the election in Wisconsin is going to wake up people rather than put them back in their shells as we move forward toward November."

First, MAPE members must vote on a new contract, starting July 19. The results will be known July 30, and submitted to the state Subcommittee on Employee Relations. If the subcommittee approves the contract, it will go to the legislature when it reconvenes in January.

Eliot Seide, executive director of AFSCME Council 5, is Monroe's counterpart, representing non-professional government workers throughout Minnesota. He met Monroe in Ohio in 1984 and they reconnected in Minnesota in 2003. He described Monroe as a "decent, intelligent, hard-working person of integrity" and a great partner.

"I think Jim has brought a sense of real trade unionism to MAPE," Seide says. "I think he's given them a larger perspective in terms of the labor movement than they had before."

Monroe intends to hang in for one more year, training a successor who has yet to be named, and working on some statewide health care issues. As for retirement, he plans to spend time with his grandchildren in Ohio and Chicago.

"I'm not going fishing or going to play golf all the time," he says.

The Monroe File

Name: James A. Monroe

Job: Executive director, Minnesota Association of Professional Employees

Age: 65

Grew up in: Columbus, Ohio

Lives in: New Brighton

Education: B.A., history, political science and sociology, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio

Family: Wife Jane, children, daughter Melissa, 34; son Rick, 32; and daughter Ashleigh, 30

Hobbies: Playing with his German shepherd and two golden retrievers

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