

Political action saves public water services

JOHNSTOWN — Ten CSEA-represented jobs in the City of Johnstown were saved through robust political action by members there.

Union members mobilized against the Johnstown Water Board's attempts to privatize work done by public employees. CSEA also urged city voters to approve a referendum to abolish the water board.

For the past decade, the City of Johnstown and the Johnstown Water Board have engaged in a power struggle over control of the city's Water Department. After a July 2022 state Supreme Court ruling that gave the water board control of the department, board members moved once again to privatize public water services.

Failed effort

The Johnstown Water Board's actions proved to be an epic failure.

The water board contracted with a private company to run city water operations. After touring the water plant and learning more about the daily operations, the private company decided to bail.

"It's entirely possible that the water board didn't have a firm grasp on the operational demands of running a water treatment facility," said CSEA Capital Region President Ron Briggs, who helped CSEA Fulton County Local President Vincent DePalma and City of Johnstown Unit President Eric Houser run our union's campaign to abolish the water board.

Once the private company

backed out of running the plant, the water board had no operational plan in place. Because of this, state regulations required that a multi-day, boil-water advisory go into effect.

"There was no water plant operator," said Houser. "The plant was unstaffed, and city residents and businesses couldn't rely on the water. We have major industries here, including FAGE Yogurt. No one wants to deal with that."

Houser noted that the boil-water advisory also took a toll on residents and small businesses that could no longer rely on their water supply being clean and safe.

CSEA takes action

City officials put an emergency order in place that would last through Election Day. The city also placed a referendum proposal on the ballot for voters to decide if the water board should be dissolved, which would return control of the Water Department to the city.

Our union, led by Houser, DePalma and Briggs, sprung to action. DePalma reached out to the Johnstown Mayor Amy Praught, who assured DePalma that the city's plan was to maintain members' jobs if the charter was changed and the water board was successfully abolished.

Praught praised the city's Public Works Department and expressed her appreciation for workers' efforts to provide high-quality public services.

"When I heard 10 CSEA members' jobs were at risk, it was a no-brainer," said DePalma. My main goal was to



From left to right, CSEA Capital Region President Ron Briggs and Fulton County Local President Vincent DePalma stand near a sign urging a yes vote on the referendum.

save those jobs."

The next step was political action in the community.

Briggs, Houser and DePalma worked with CSEA Political Action Coordinator Bryan Gorman to develop a multi-pronged campaign to give voters information on the issue and referendum.

On November 5, Fulton County Local activists visited union members at their homes to urge them to approve abolishing the board.

The local and unit also posted signs throughout the city asking for a yes vote and created social media posts to support the referendum. On Election Day, voters overwhelmingly approved abolishing the water board.

"The board is now done and the city will have complete control," said Houser. "Workers will be trained, and infrastructure that has been neglected will be repaired."

Houser credited the campaign's success to the fact that union members live in the community.

"The campaign worked because our union helped persuade people," said Houser. "We live in the city, we have families, we pay taxes here and we can do the job better."

The vote has already paid off for city residents.

"We just had a water main break on a Saturday, and six workers came in to fix it," said Houser. "If that happened with a private company, good luck getting things fixed so fast."

This campaign is also a great example of why union membership is so valuable.

"What a great effort put forth by the unit members. This is why Legislative and Political action is so important to be involved with."

"I often hear, what does the union do for me?" said DePalma. "The next time I hear that, it is a very simple answer, - we give, we get and we fight when it is needed most. As an activist, you learn you are never alone."

"What a great effort put forth by the unit members," said Briggs. "This is why Legislative and Political action is so important to be involved with. These members could have lost their jobs through no fault of their own, instead they found an ally in the mayor and worked hard, not only for their jobs, but to make certain that residents of Johnstown have safe drinking water. This is a win for CSEA, but it's also a clear victory for the community. Residents know that we always put community first."

— Therese Assalian

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