

UNITY

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Council prepares for contract negotiations

Work on the next AFGE/SSA National Agreement has already begun, even though the current contract does not expire until this August.

Witold Skwierczynski, the President of Council 220, says bargaining unit employees should get involved in the process now and stay committed to the effort.

“We want to engender enthusi-

asm at the grass roots level from employees so they believe they have a stake in the process and they believe the Union is speaking for them,” Skwierczynski told UNITY.

“Last November’s election results will certainly have a lot to do with our abilities to achieve success,” he continued. “Under the Bush administration, the attitude

was to diminish the Union’s strength and to de-unionize the workforce as much as possible. I expect just the opposite from President Obama.

“Unfortunately, current SSA Commissioner Astrue has cut off all communication with the Union and he has no inclination to provide employees with new benefits or better working conditions.”

During the last round of contract negotiations in 2005-2006, Skwierczynski said the management officials representing Social Security were “definitely anti-Union” and two of his goals during the next set of talks will be to improve the agreement that’s now in place and to build the Union by empowering employees.

“A grass roots employee movement will be the key to success, especially if Mr. Astrue doesn’t change his attitude toward SSA employees,” Skwierczynski believes.

“Obviously we want to restore most if not all of the things we had in the previous contract.”

In March, 2008 a planning session was held in Las Vegas; about 60 people attended the meeting and Skwierczynski described it as a “combination of training and talking about a different approach to contract negotiations.” Two subsequent meetings of Local Union Presidents have been held in prep-

NOTICE **Convention Call and Elections**

You are hereby notified in compliance with the AFGE Council 220 constitution, that the 2009 National Convention will be held Friday, August 21-Saturday, August 22 at:

Grand Sierra Resort and Casino
2500 East Second Street—Reno, NV 89595

Nominations and elections for all AFGE Council 220 executive office positions will be held at the convention. These positions include: President, Executive Vice President, 1st Vice President, 2nd Vice President, 3rd Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer.

The term of office is 3 years ending with the installation of officers following the regularly scheduled elections in 2012.

Qualifications for office are:

- be a member in good standing of this Council,
- be a member of one year of an AFGE Local, immediately preceding the closing of the nomination process
- not be a member of any labor organization not affiliated with the AFLCIO.

Nominations will be accepted from the floor. A second nomination is not required. Self nominations are permissible. Candidates must accept nomination at the meeting or, if not in attendance, submit a written acceptance to the Elections Committee Chair before the close of nominations. Placement on the ballot will be determined following nominations.

A runoff election will be held if necessary following the counting of ballots at a time and place determined by the Elections Committee. All protests to the election must be in writing and received by the Elections Committee prior to, during, or within ten days after the election. This election is governed by the AFGE Rules of Conduct for an Election, set forth in Appendix A of the AFGE National Constitution. Voting and delegate representation will be in accordance with Article IV and Article XII of the AFGE Council 220 Constitution.

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Council 220 president leads team at the table

A recent meeting of Union Presidents and other officials ended with an important announcement: Witold Skwierczynski has been named labor's Chief Negotiator for the 2009 AFGE/SSA contract.

Jim Marshall and Agatha Joseph were named Deputy Chiefs. Skwierczynski is President of Council 220. Marshall is a long-time ODAR employee and President of Council 215; Joseph is President of Council 109, which includes all six Payment Centers.

"This is a great honor for me," Skwierczynski said. "A lot of work has to be done on the national agreement and the Union is putting together a top notch team that will deal effectively with an agency that's still trying to take away employee rights and benefits."

The weeklong meeting was held in Las Vegas and featured keynote

speaker Bill Fletcher, the Director of Field Services and Education for AFGE.

Fletcher has a long history of Union activism and he recently co-authored *Solidarity Divided*, a book about the current state of the labor movement in America. (See related article on page 3).



Photo by Barbara Jackson

Attending the recent Presidents' Meeting in Las Vegas were (from left) Tom Webb, ODAR Local President and Regional Vice President; Mary Peck, ODAR Regional Vice President; and Rich Couture, President of Boston Region's AFGE Local 1164.

In the next edition of UNITY:

- SSA management has been accused of using the Federal Career Intern Program (FCIP) to hire friends and relatives.
- A new report from the General Accountability Office (GAO) points out a number of serious problems within Social Security.
- A former employee has accused a supervisor of harassing him because he refused to date one of her friends.

UNITY

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Member: AFGE Editors Association

Fletcher brings new ideas to the table

By John Oertel
Staff Writer

When Bill Fletcher speaks, Union leaders and management listen very closely.

With decades of experience behind him, he is helping the AFGE/SSA General Committee (GC) formulate a campaign and strategy for the contract negotiations which begin later this year. The GC includes Union officials from the Wilkes-Barre Data Operations Center, ODAR (the Hearings Offices), the six Payment Centers, field offices and tele-service centers, ROQA (Regional Office Quality Assurance), and Headquarters.

“The GC is attempting to carry out negotiations in a very different way,” Fletcher said, “where they are looking at combining what happens at the table with membership involvement and engagement.”

He adds that “negotiations used to be treated as a spectator sport so that employees may or may not be asked their opinions. They generally voted on contract demands and ratification. Other than that, they didn’t do anything. That’s just the way it was. Now we are looking to do something much different.

“Bargaining is won in every case based on the perception or reality of the power of either side; we need to be building up our power. We need to make sure that all potential members become Union members.”

Fletcher is AFGE’s Director of Field Services and Education and he has spent most of his adult life in the labor movement. He has also served as a Visiting Professor in political science at Brooklyn College-City University of New York. After graduating from Harvard College, he became a shipyard welder and was an active member of Local 5, the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America. That was followed by high-ranking positions with the AFL-CIO, the National Mail Handlers Union, the Service Employee International Union, and several other organizations.

From 2002 to 2006, he served as the President of TransAfrica Forum, the education and advocacy group focusing on issues facing the peoples of Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America.

With so many years of experience in the labor movement, Fletcher knows what games management



Bill Fletcher

likes to play.

“They consistently try to drive a wedge between the Union leadership and its members,” he said. “Some people may conclude that management doesn’t like ‘Person X,’ so that if the Union replaces that person, we will get a better deal. “Management would like employees to believe that’s true, but it never is.”

His advice to all members of the bargaining unit in all components is to “gear up” and to become actively involved in the negotiating process.

“I hope it will be a quick journey, but I don’t think it will be,” Fletcher predicted. “Management expects traditional negotiations and they don’t expect that employees will get involved.”

CONTRACT

From page 1

aration for those talks.

Several committees were established during the first planning session in Las Vegas.

“One is dealing with communications and Council 220 has already sent out one survey, asking members of the bargaining unit around the country how they felt about a number of issues. These included workplace stress and problems in getting leave. More than 3,000 people responded to the survey and that’s a very impressive number.”

The Contract Communications Committee chose a theme (“Restoring Rights, Gaining Respect, Preserving Social Security”) and established a website: www.mycontract2009.org.

“There is also a Contract Action Team, and a research group to look at issues that will be key elements of our contract proposals.”

Skwierzynski expects the negotiations to be held in Baltimore and they could last a year or more.

Members of the bargaining unit who want to get involved in any part of the process should contact their local Union president.

www.mycontract2009.org

New Haven water bottle issue resolved

One of the longstanding issues between AFGE Local 1164 and management in the New Haven, Connecticut Social Security office has been resolved.

Chaisnel Ford, a clerical employee with several years of experience, was given a written reprimand by Operations Supervisor Eric Williamson in October, 2007 because she took a water bottle to the reception desk. (This story was first reported in the March, 2008 UNITY).

Williamson stated that the "carpeting is only 18 months old and...stains are ruining the appearance of the rug," but he offered no proof that Ford ever dropped anything on the carpet.

George Sincavage, a Union official and Area Vice President for Connecticut, later said that management in the New Haven office harassed Ford because they didn't like her, even though "she's a good hard worker...who goes above and beyond for the public."

A grievance was filed over the water bottle-incident and it was scheduled for arbitration when both sides decided to settle the matter. Management agreed to take the reprimand out of the employee's personnel folder and not reference it (or the fact that it had been issued) in any future discipline. Ford then withdrew her grievance.

"She's happy with the settlement," Sincavage recently said, and he noted that Ford's working life has gotten much better since former District Manager Sylviane Haldiman was transferred to an agency project in Baltimore.

"Hopefully she will not return to terrorize the district office employees again," Sincavage continued.

"She was the only SSA official to ignore union emails. Not even Regional Commissioner Manny Vaz did that! Too bad SSA management forced former Commissioner Shirley Chater out. With her plan to eliminate five regional offices – including the one in Boston -- New England employees would be happier today!

"There are still problems with the

other remaining members of management in New Haven, but the new DM (Carla Martin) is making things better for the employees."

Ford still has an EEO complaint and an Unfair Labor Practice (ULP) pending against the agency. Sincavage believes Martin would like to settle those issues as well, but officials in the Boston Regional Office apparently won't let her.

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor:

We would like to extend our appreciation to you for providing an opportunity for us to take part in the development of a new Labor agreement. Hopefully, this will be the first step toward strengthening our position with management.

The word "change" is used freely these days but the need for change is evident in the public we serve daily and in the spirit of the frustrated workforce who has had more than enough of the past eight years of anti-labor treatment.

Labor proved to be the backbone and force behind the recent and impressive election victories in November and we must keep the pressure on the incoming Administration to correct the wrongs done and re-establish the rights of workers in order to give the middle-class the power to restore our economy.

Thank you again for leading the way and providing an open door of communication. Power to the people and power to the new revolution that is the re-emergence of the Union movement.

Respectfully submitted,

E24

El Paso, Texas

Dear Editor:

First of all, let me say thank you for the recent story on ISBA (not that it will help any, as we in the Kapolei DO fight the problem of waste). We the Service Representatives are forced to man e-services and do a Claims Rep job at our pay. If a CR were to sit at this station, they would have accomplished (according to our records) 17 visits last week. If you amortize this over the week, that is 3.4 claims per day with a personal visit and fewer mistakes and follow-ups.

Could the manpower be used better? We think so. If Service Reps continue in this position, they need to be comparable in grade and pay to what the Claims Reps have now. The gap between the two jobs has narrowed to the point of crossing-over duties.

We agree the OS will say anything to the higher-ups to make them feel good about their decision to launch this program. However, IT IS A BOMB. Can you tell we are tired of wasting our workday? Thank you for your time in this matter and I do hope the Union can do something to help the employees who suffer through the day as ISBA assistants.

Service Representative
Kapolei, Hawaii

Arbitrator rules in favor of AFGÉ over teleservice center leave issues

An arbitrator has told the Social Security Administration to immediately rescind a series of guidelines that it implemented three years ago.

Those rules applied to approximately 6,100 800-number agents around the country. The agency unilaterally imposed quotas in April, 2006 and it would only allow ten per cent of bargaining unit employees to take annual leave on “peak call days” and 15% on “non-peak days.”

“This was a direct violation of the national contract,” said Charlie Estudillo, the First Vice President of Council 220 and the Union’s representative at the arbitration hearing.

“The agreement clearly states that Social Security will make every effort to allow the *maximum number* of employees to use leave, but SSA management decided to do just the opposite.”

Commissioner Michael Astrue has appealed the arbitrator’s decision, meaning it will not be implemented immediately.

“The result is that more employees will have to suffer because they’re being denied the leave they should be granted,” said Witold Skwierczynski, the President of Council 220.

“The decision by SSA to appeal the arbitration award and continue the policy of severely restricting leave opportunities for 800-number employees is another indication of the hostile attitude that the agency has displayed and continues to display toward employee rights and benefits for the last eight years,” Skwierczynski believes.

He added: “All Social Security employees hope and expect that the Obama Administration will take action soon to change the attitude within SSA so that employees will again be valued for their work and their ideas and that employee rights, benefits and upward mobility will be actual facets of the agency culture and not just empty promises.”

During the arbitration hearing, the Union introduced testimony from eleven employees that showed the agency’s restrictive policy was extended to all types of leave (not just annual).

“Employees were required to have an obituary for Family Friendly Leave for their immediate family members’ funerals,” arbitrator Sean J. Rogers wrote in his 25-page decision. “An employee (was) denied leave to care for a dying partner; an employee required to provide a doctor’s note to pick up her mother at the hospital following an auto accident; an employee denied leave for her children’s

school activities and required to provide a doctor’s note to care for her father in intensive care.”

Other examples included an employee who was accused of being AWOL until she provided a doctor’s note for an appendectomy; she was later given a reprimand for taking Family Friendly Leave to care for her sick grandmother.

“One supervisor required an

employee to get a note from the movers who were delivering new furniture to her home showing what time they got there and left,” Estudillo said. “If an employee got a flat tire or had a car problem, a note was required from the mechanic. Another employee was denied a four-hour sick leave request for a dental appointment scheduled four months in the future.

“These examples showed how out-of-control the agency had become,” Estudillo added. “Managers all over the United States thought they could restrict all types of leave (sick leave, emergency leave, Family Friendly Leave). I’m glad the Union was able to step in and put an end to the agency’s practice.”

Several management officials testified during the arbitration hearing. One of them was Martha Tatum, manager of the Salinas, Calif. teleservice center, but she did not impress the arbitrator.

“Tatum was evasive and avoided responding to direct questions,” Rogers stated.

“The decision by SSA to appeal the arbitration award and continue the policy of severely restricting leave opportunities for 800-number employees is another indication of the hostile attitude that the agency has displayed and continues to display toward employee rights and benefits for the last eight years.”

Tale of two offices' woes

Health and safety issues spark grievances

Lack of water sends Wisconsin employees in search of restrooms for a week in winter

Management in the Rhinelander, Wisconsin, Social Security Office recently kept that facility open for nearly a week – even though it had no running water or bathroom facilities for employees and the public.

“I’m sure the manager was more interested in producing work units than in proper sanitation,” said Loni Schultz, the President of AFGE Local 1346, who filed a grievance over the incident.

“The employees had to go offsite if they needed to go to the bathroom,” she continued. “But you have to remember that this was in the middle of winter and Wisconsin gets very, very cold. There were no ‘portapotties’ and this was certainly no way to treat the public when they came into the office to be helped.”

The manager of the Rhinelander office is Erik Matson, but Schultz believes he was getting direction from Maria Ramirez, the District Manager in Wausau, Wisconsin.

“The Administration shall provide a safe and healthy work environment...”

Article 9

able to get into the Rhinelander office.

“It was only after I called OSHA (the Occupational Safety and Health Administration) that something was done,” she told **UNITY**. “Management finally brought in some water on a Thursday – several days after the problem started – and the office was eventually closed the next day.” It was reopened the following week.

As part of her grievance, Schultz noted that management violated Article 9 of the contract “by failing to provide a safe and healthy work environment by requiring employees to work in an environment without

bathroom facilities and water for drinking and washing their hands for a week.

“In addition, the employees were exposed to noxious fumes in the office by heavy machinery used for 12 hours to dig up frozen pipes.”

Some Rhinelander employees took annual leave instead of working in a facility that had no running water. Schultz says that the grievance asks that leave be reimbursed, and members of the bargaining unit will be paid mileage if they traveled offsite to use a bathroom.

Colorado employees fall ill to fumes from roof repairs

AFGE Local 1802 has filed a grievance because of incidents which occurred at the Colorado Springs Social Security Office between July and September, 2008.

Local President Pam Baca says the problems were initially caused by tarring of the roof over the office.

“A few employees became ill,” Baca wrote in her grievance to Denver Regional Commissioner Nancy Berryhill and Deputy Regional Commissioner Martha Lambie.

“The agency, at that time, knew additional tarring was to be done within the next month and had the opportunity to take the necessary steps to ensure both employee and public safety.”

The situation got much worse in August, when the tarring project was moved directly over the office and the intensity of the fumes increased.

“Employees had to endure extremely noxious fumes, making 75% of them ill,” Baca stated.

“Several employees had severe headaches both during work and after their tours had ended. Several employees indicated they became nauseous at work, a condition that continued after they went home.”

The public was also impacted by those fumes.

“It is unknown exactly how many (people) were adversely affected, but employees reported and documented several complaints per day, many of them

Survey: employees unhappy over awards

A survey commissioned by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) shows that many Social Security employees are dissatisfied with the awards process and they don't believe creativity and innovation are rewarded.

More than 210,000 Government employees from many different agencies participated in the 2008 "Federal Human Capital Survey."

The purpose of the study, according to Acting OPM Director Michael W. Hager, is "to gauge the impressions of our civil servants, and seek out those areas where agencies are doing well, and where improvement is needed."

The survey covered more than 60 topics, including "awards in my work unit depend on how well employees perform their jobs." At Social Security, only eleven per cent of the respondents strongly agreed with that statement. More than 30 per cent either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

"SSA management should take a very close look at that number," said Debbie Fredericksen, the Executive

Vice President of Council 220.

"Something is terribly wrong when only a small number of people feel good about awards, and so many think there's a problem.

"This study included both management and the bargaining unit, so neither group apparently thinks the system is functioning very well."

Another question asked whether "creativity and innovation are rewarded." Within SSA, only ten per cent strongly agreed with that notion. Over a quarter (26.5%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

"What does it say about an agency when a large group of employees doesn't think creative input is valued?" Fredericksen asked. "And what does it say about the managers themselves, the people who should be encouraging new ideas? Do they just 'go along to get along?' And do they feel threatened by subordinates who want to make the workplace better?"

While a large number (more than 80%) of SSA employees like the kind

of work they do, about one-fifth have little or no confidence in their supervisor and many do not think their workload is reasonable.

When asked if promotions are based on merit, only a small number (8.2%) strongly agreed with that statement. Almost 35% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

"Employees who have been around a while, work hard, and know their jobs well don't seem to get promoted," Fredericksen believes. "When employees are hired at an agency like SSA with its complex programs and lengthy training periods, those who are promoted should be required to be with the agency long enough to be able to answer technical questions and have the skills to deal with employees.

"That is not always the case at Social Security and it seems to be getting worse lately."

To view the entire survey and its results, go to:

<http://www.fhcs.opm.gov/2008>.

OFFICE WOES

From page 6

written," Baca noted in her grievance. "One member of the public became violently ill when the fumes triggered severe nausea caused by her chemotherapy. Another claimant had to use a breathing inhaler several times during a 45 minute interview."

In September, monsoon rains covered the Colorado Springs area and that created another set of problems: tarps and water seals used by the roofing company failed during the storms, causing large amounts of rain to enter the office.

"As a result," Baca wrote, "many places of the ceiling collapsed, including light fixtures and ceiling supports...the carpet and employee desk areas were completely saturated. The office attempted a clean up process, but the process resulted in rain water, dirt, and debris cascading down upon employees and their workspaces when it was pushed from the insulation."

(A picture of the damage can be seen in the November, 2008 **UNITY**).

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) investigated the situation and issued a report, indicating that eight out of eleven Air Handling Intake seals were faulty and had failed during the tarring process.

"These seals were supposed to be checked and either maintained or replaced prior to the start of the tarring process," Baca told **UNITY**. "The whole situation could have been avoided had GSA (General Services Administration) and SSA made sure the work on the seals was done correctly."

Because the situation had been resolved by the time the grievance was filed, Baca requested that any employee who took leave as a result of the dangerous conditions have that leave restored to them. She also asked that employees who suffered any type of loss be compensated, and that the Union and management develop a comprehensive plan for future roof tarring projects.



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Employee Free Choice Act deserves to pass

By Andy Stern, President, SEIU

Unless you've been living under a rock for the last year, it's no surprise that millions of Americans are out of work, losing their health care or their retirement money, or are otherwise in financial straits. Times are tough.

Four million people have lost their jobs since the recession began in December 2007. In terms of productivity, people are working harder than ever--but American workers still haven't gotten a raise. The average cost of family health insurance plan will go up to \$24,000 by 2016.

The Employee Free Choice Act says that workers should have the ability to bargain with their employers for better wages and benefits--like affordable quality health care.

Good for the economy

One of the biggest reasons for our current economic crisis? People literally don't have the cash they need to buy goods and services--which helps the economy. Higher wages and higher benefits gives workers the purchasing power they need to buy more of the goods and services that this economy produces. According to the Center for American Progress Action Fund, unionization could pump more than \$49 billion into the economy.

But don't take it just from us.. Forty leading economists (including three Nobel prize winners) took out a full-page ad in the *Washington Post* supporting the bill. In the ad, they argued that one of the main reasons for our economic slump is the "erosion of workers' ability to form unions and bargain collec-

tively," that shifted the wealth of our country from "broadly-shared prosperity" to "growing inequality."

Barack Obama loves it, and so do most of you

According to recent polling, 73% of the public supports it. Just last week, speaking in front of a labor gathering, the President vowed to pass the Employee Free Choice Act, stating,

"I have every confidence that if we are willing to do the difficult work that must be done, we will emerge from these trials stronger and more prosperous than we were before. And as we confront this crisis and work to provide health care to every American, rebuild our nation's infrastructure, move toward a clean energy economy, and pass the Employee Free Choice Act, I want you to know that you will always have a seat at the table."

CEOs should be helping, not hurting, workers

Compare an employee paycheck to a CEO's. As a testament to the growing income disparity between CEOs and the workers they employ, look no further than Wal-Mart's former CEO, Lee Scott. Scott earned \$15,000 an hour in 2007 while Wal-Mart workers earned just \$10.68 an hour. On average, CEOs earn 344 times more than their typical employee helped create.

Because the other side is really scary

Or at least, they're trying their hardest to scare us. The corporate interests opposing the Employee Free Choice Act warn of everything from rioting in the streets to, literally, Armageddon if the bill passes. The bill is not scary—it's online. Go to:

<http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=h111-1409>