Three bills initiated within the House of Representatives are looming over the Federal workforce currently. Congress calls the bills H.R. 1259, H.R. 1364, and H.R. 1461; and they are attacks upon all federal workers and their union representatives because what happens to one federal agency can set precedent for all.

H.R. 1259 will drastically change the discipline procedure for Veteran Administration employees. This bill will make it easier for the VA to fire, demote, suspend and discipline employees for ALLEGED misconduct or poor performance. This means the VA does not need proof to discipline, just the allegation that misconduct occurred. As employees of SSA, you may wonder why you should concern yourself with VA matters. You should concern yourself with any bill that would diminish employee rights at any agency because your agency may be next.

Under this proposed legislation, employees will be prohibited from using the negotiated grievance and arbitration procedures to contest decisions to suspend for more than 14 days, demote or terminate. The only appeal procedure available for these disciplinary and performance based actions will be appeals to the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPD). MSPB judges notoriously uphold management actions in the vast majority of cases. The legislation also precludes MSPB judges from mitigating penalties; unlike currently, MSPB judges and arbitrators are allowed to reduce excessive penalties imposed by management. This bill has already passed the House of Representatives and can become law if the Senate passes it and the President signs it.

H.R. 1364 will tie the hands of our Union Representatives. This bill will allow agencies to take away retirement benefits from a Union Representative for performing their union duties. The Union will find it almost impossible to recruit union reps if the official time they use will adversely affect their pensions. In addition, the bill will prohibit a union representative from lobbying lawmakers in their official capacity. Lobbying gives the federal worker a voice on the Hill.

H.R. 1461 will impose limits on who can serve as a union representative, how much time a rep can spend on union duties and what a rep is allowed to do – including a prohibition on lobbying Congress. This bill will also cap the amount of official time allowed based on a rep’s position within their agency, (i.e. ZERO official time allowances for doctors, dentists, etc.) In addition, the bill will increase the probationary period for new employees from 12 to 18 months to give the agency a longer period to fire the employee for any or no reason. This bill currently targets VA employees only. However, if the legislation passes Congress, it will likely result in legislative proposals to impose the same restrictions on union reps in all federal agencies.

All bargaining unit employees have benefited from union representation whether directly in a case or as an employee in an office. We ask you to contact your Congressman to oppose any bill that would hurt Federal workers. To read these bills in their entirety, track them as they move through Congress, and contact your lawmaker download the AFGE Activist App @ www.afge.org/activistapp. Please contact your lawmaker and URGE them to oppose any bill that diminishes your union rights!
A Federal Employee’s Guide to Legislative and Political Activity: Do’s and Don’ts

Shawn Halloran, Staff Writer

The Federal bureaucracy was built on the premise that rank and file employees must carry out the work of their Agency in a way that is insulated from political influence and governmental changes in power. However, as federal workers know, all too well, what happens on Capitol Hill has significant influence on both their work and personal lives.

AFGE is very active in educating Congress on federal worker and SSA issues. Still, in order to have a meaningful impact on what Congress does and how it affects them, employees must act. As a voting constituent living in a Congressional Representative’s district, federal employees can be a legislative and political activist without violating the Hatch Act.

**DO**

✓ Talk with other employees about legislative or other issues such as pay, conditions of employment, and employee rights. Non-partisan education on issues is not political activity and does not violate the Hatch Act.
✓ Contact your lawmakers on non-duty time using a personal phone and email. AFGE Union representatives can lobby Congress on official time while at the office, however they must be clear that they are contacting them as a Union official and are not speaking on behalf of the Agency.
✓ Visit or communicate with lawmakers on non-duty time. Take a flex lunch, for example, and visit your Congressperson’s office with other employees and your union rep to talk about life in an SSA office and how we need more employees.
✓ Voice opinions on social media. As long as you do not self-identify as a federal employee in your post and are not on duty time or government equipment, you have the freedom to speak your mind on Facebook, Twitter, etc. Just be very mindful of the rules.
✓ Campaign for partisan candidates (i.e., President, Senator, House of Representatives, Governor, etc.) on your own time. This means doing phone banks, door knocking, office work, leafleting, giving speeches, attending rallies, etc.

**DON’T**

✓ Lobby Congress while on duty time or using government equipment. This includes Agency phones, paper or other equipment. Union reps can use official time and Agency equipment to do this.
✓ Use the Agency’s e-mail, or other communication systems to circulate any material asking an AFGE member or potential member to write, call, or email their Congressional Representatives to support or oppose legislative issues.
✓ Read election candidate emails on government equipment or time.
✓ Ask for or accept contributions to a political party or candidate.
✓ Send out a personal appeal asking others to donate money to a party or partisan candidate or forward, via email, an appeal from a social media program such as Facebook.

During AFGE’s Grassroots and Legislative Conference this past February in Washington D.C., a message widely heard from attendees was that Representatives WANT to hear from SSA employees to find out what is going on in their offices. Therefore, the most important “do” on the list: **SSA employees must do something to protect their livelihood.**
Unity: When did you first become a union representative and where?
EVP Duggins: 1987, Watts, CA - DO

Unity: What was the union like when you became a rep?
EVP Duggins: Scary, I was not confident and, although I was outspoken, I was uncomfortable with confrontation.

Unity: Why did you want to become a rep?
EVP Duggins: I was asked by the rep in my office to be her back up. I accepted and she went out on worker’s comp the following week! I then became the rep of the office.

Unity: What events have shaped you as a rep?
EVP Duggins: My manager in Watts welcomed me as the new rep and told me that we would work fine together. [The manager further commented] “Besides, these folks work well for black people.” I was sickened by her statement and knew instantly. I was doing what I was meant to do! From that point forward, I worked hard to learn everything I could, to be the best rep that I could be for the employees in my offices.

Unity: What is your greatest accomplishment as a rep?
EVP Duggins: This is hard because I am very proud of [all] I have accomplished over the last 30 years. I believe the most rewarding was helping the employees that were effected by hurricane Katrina. Council 220 President, Witold Skwierzynski, and I went to Louisiana and Mississippi to talk to the employees. It was a very emotional experience for me, absolute devastation - Heartbreaking. [It was appearing like] Former Commissioner Barnhart was unwilling to help her employees, while other federal agencies helped theirs. I was able to go to Washington D.C. and talk to the Majority Leader, Trent Lott, who also lost his home in Katrina. He called the Commissioner personally. The next thing I knew, SSA agreed to pay benefits retroactively for all affected employees and their families resulting in over $6 million. It was the least SSA could do for these folks. I am proud that I was able to do that for them. Since Katrina, SSA has continued to help employees where hazardous weather conditions have occurred.

Unity: How has the Union changed over the years?
EVP Duggins: For many years, we had [many] dedicated leaders in place for years. Now we have fewer activists, when we need devoted members and leaders more than ever.

Unity: What is the most important issue facing our Union?
EVP Duggins: Our very existence [is at stake]. Unfortunately, anti-union business has made calculated investments in Members of Congress. Their orders are to erode union rights, benefits, and leverage so that Unions become outdated. Public unions are their focus because our membership is growing. Congress is aware that we have a strong voice on Capitol Hill. We fight for a better budget, more employees, more overtime, improvements in health care and retirement, cost of living increases, and so on. We are also advocates for the public we serve and address flawed or harmful agency policies, such as MySSA, Special Disability Workloads (SDW), Office closures, long hold times, long waiting times, etc. Now, we are fighting for our very existence!

Unity: What were some of the hurdles you have faced over the years?
EVP Duggins: In the beginning, I had to learn when to let issues go. Sometimes you are so driven to win; you do not realize you already have! The biggest hurdle for me has been balancing my Union work with my family life. My Union work is a big part of who I am. For many of my politically conservative family members, that has been a problem at times. In the end, I have no regrets. My husband and I adopted five children and raised four grandchildren. We have changed their lives forever and they changed ours. I think my Union work and my SSA work is much like that. We help employees and make every effort to improve their work life. Like parenting, we are not always successful in our endeavors. [We] just try harder next time.

Unity: What advice can you give to new reps?
EVP Duggins: Call a local union leader to keep informed and discuss issues. Learn everything you can from the leaders you have. No one stays in that position forever and the next thing you know, you will be in his or her shoes. You will need to know what they know. Be patient and try not to judge the employees that need your help. We are often criticized for representing bad employees, [this is] not true at all. Sometimes we represent employees who have done bad things and try to rehabilitate them so they can move forward. Sometimes we help them understand what they have done wrong. Sometimes we find that the “bad” employee did not receive proper training. There are a million factors involved and sorting through it all is what we do for them.

Talk to your local manager(s). You can resolve issues so much easier if you just learn to talk to (not yell at) each other. The union rep and local manager have a lot more in common than you think. I talk to my manager a couple times a week. We rarely have grievances in my office because we are able to address issues before they become problems.

Unity: Anything extra you would like to add?
EVP Duggins: If you are not a member, join us. If you are a member, help us. We, federal employees, are in for the fight of our lives. Cutting agency resources, hiring freezes, possible furloughs, and RIFs (Reduction in Force) are all on the table during the appropriations process. Additionally, employee retirement benefits and taxes, health insurance costs, union membership, and COLAs are all under attack. We all need to stand up against these [issues]. When asked to call your Member of Congress, walk a picket line at lunch, go to a rally after work or on a weekend, PLEASE take the time to do it. Besides, it is a great civics lesson for your kids that they will never forget!
Activism at the Dawn of the Trump Administration

Q & A with President Skwierczynski

Q: What scares you most about the Trump Administration?
A: I am concerned about the bigotry, lack of compassion, and lack of understanding of how government works. Alternatively, if they do understand how government works better than is apparent, I am concerned they lack respect for government systems in place so our citizens can achieve a decent life. Honestly, I think [President Trump] is trying to tear it all down. It makes me angry that this individual was elected. He has an inability to tell the truth. He has not demonstrated that he is reliable in managing crisis, or has the ability to prevent war. I have many concerns about this administration that go beyond SSA. I am concerned he will appoint a Commissioner whose main goal is to deconstruct SSA. Look at Trump’s appointments with Perry to the Department of Energy, DeVos to Education, Pruitt to the EPA. They all have goals to tear apart and radically change these agencies. I am concerned about privatization. He appointed Tom Price to the Department of Health and Human Services who wants to raise the age of Medicare eligibility to 67. Mick Mulvaney [Trump’s newly confirmed budget director] wants to cut disability benefits. These people have no interest in providing benefits for citizens. Trump is unreliable because he changes his tone so frequently. It is a very frightening time. I equate it to the chaos when I was young during the Vietnam War and to the fear of being drafted. The concerns now are broader, however, they expand to the whole country and all its citizens. Then and now are the two biggest times of concern in my life.

Q: What inspires you about these times?
A: Nothing. Except it energizes me to resist. That is not inspiration. It is a negative effect. I want to resist. We cannot defeat Trump’s agenda unless we resist. We have to align with other groups that feel threatened. Many citizens have problems. We have to join together to defeat this administration’s agenda. That’s a challenge. I like challenges!

Q: If you could ask one thing from SSA employees, what would it be?
A: I would ask non-members to join the Union. Members and non-members should visit their legislators and tell them how hard it is to work in offices. Talk about the pressures of your job because Congress does not want to fund the program properly. Get out of your cubicle and hit the streets. Join your brothers and sisters in your neighborhoods and demand respect. Resist!

Q: What keeps you inspired in this line of work facing the 44th anniversary of your SSA Union Career?
A: I am a Union guy. I am interested in seeing that people are treated right at work and have a good benefits package. I still have a drive to make that happen. I feel I have a purpose. To create a stronger Union is a big deal. I am concerned that the working people have an organization that looks out for them. I think it is important. In the years I have left I want to make sure Unions are strengthened and preserved.
Charter Objective 1: To assist the Agency in the development of training material to help management and employees understand and address the needs of veterans:

1. Develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) awareness and understanding training for all employees and management.
2. Replace the current PTSD-TBI VOD posted on the Military Community Gateway website.
3. Develop training for HR Staff to assist veterans with the personnel-related needs (e.g. Veterans-related hiring authorities, reasonable accommodations, etc.)
4. Evaluate the training via survey.

Charter Objective 2: To develop a communication plan to educate veterans on existing upward mobility and career development plans.

5. Send a bi-annual reminder email in May (Memorial Day) and November (Veterans Day) regarding Veteran resources (e.g. Vet website, Wall of Honor).
6. Create posters and flyers to advertise Veterans resources.
7. Replace the current Military Community Gateway website with a new website entitled Veterans Employee Terminal (VET).
8. Encourage the Regions to provide a link to the VET website where appropriate on their respective pages.

Charter Objective 3: To develop recommendations (As appropriate, may include training, communicating with, and educating veterans about existing programs, or other appropriate methods) regarding issues veterans encounter in the workplace.

9. Create a National Human Resources Veterans Liaison, as well as a Veterans Liaison in each respective Region.
10. Develop standard New Employee Orientation packages for Veterans, to include: the Veterans liaison names, contact information, and information regarding the VET website.
A Reminder on Space Heaters

James Campana, Council Representative

“Sumer Is Icumen In.” The traditional song, written down in Middle English in the 12th century, was echoed in George Harrison’s, “Here comes the sun…. ” Whether you are a wandering troubadour, the Beatles, or somebody else, it does the heart good to note that the weather is getting warmer.

Whether in the midst of a polar vortex or the indoor environment of summer air conditioning, SSA employees around the country often work in uncomfortable and unhealthy temperatures. So, why are you not allowed to use a personal space heater? Personal space heaters were causing fires in SSA facilities; therefore, in 2013, the Agency decided to ban space heaters completely.

AFGE objected to this, and demanded to bargain. Under law, when SSA plans a change, BEFORE they implement it, they are required to give the Union advance notice, with an opportunity to bargain the change. In this case SSA reversed the process and banned everything, then made efforts to bargain with AFGE. This resulted in an unfair labor practice (ULP) against the Agency, which AFGE filed in 2013 (in 2014, to advance bargaining negotiations and expedite a space-heater appeal, AFGE withdrew the ULP). SSA and AFGE bargained the issue but were unable to reach an agreement. They sought assistance from federal labor agencies and panels, which ended in a pared-down negotiation session in February 2016. Out of it came the National Space Heaters Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

The MOU’s negotiated procedure is simply for employees who are cold at work - whether they have health issues or not. However, the MOU recognizes that employees with serious health concerns can choose to warm their workplace through a reasonable accommodation request (refusals to accommodate can be appealed through the EEO process).

In a situation where an employee is cold and wants that corrected, employees and their Union should work together. You can find detailed guidance on understanding and following the MOU on Council 220’s website, www.afgec220.org or by sending an E-mail requesting the Space Heaters Advisory to james.campana@ssa.gov.
The History of MayDay!

Suzanne Moseman, Staff Writer, in collaboration with Jessica LaPointe

“Eight hours labor, eight hours recreation, eight hours rest.” Robert Owen 1817

May 1st, also known as Mayday, International Worker’s Day, or Labour Day, is a public holiday observed in most of Africa, Asia, South America and Europe. It shares the day with Beltane, the Gaelic pastoral ceremony of spring and rebirth, Maypole dancing and flower crowns, and the Catholic Church’s dedication to Saint Joseph the Worker – the Patron Saint of Workers and Craftsman. Internationally, it is widely known as a day of recognition and protest for workers’ rights that dates back to the 19th Century with the Chicago Haymarket Affair.

The Affair began on May 1, 1886, when The American Federation of Labor declared the eight-hour workday shall be the law of the land. Subsequently 300,000 American workers went on strike nationwide for an “eight hour workday with no cut in pay.” On May 4, near Chicago’s Haymarket, police were attempting to disperse a crowd listening to labor and protest speeches when an unidentified person threw a dynamite bomb at police. The police began shooting at the crowd in defense. At least seven police officers and four protestors died in the incident with many more wounded. In the aftermath of Haymarket, authorities rounded up labor organizers. Eight were arrested and tried. Although there was no evidence any of them conspired or threw the bomb, a court convicted all eight and condemned them to death. In the coming years, one committed suicide, four were hanged, and two had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment. In 1893, Chicago Governor John Peter Altgeld, who considered the trial an injustice, pardoned the three living men.

In 1889, the Second International convened in Paris and declared May 1 International Worker’s Day in honor of the lives lost over worker rights during the Haymarket Affair. In the many years that followed, labor organizations continued to call for an international day of protest on May 1st to continue the eight hour narrative. In 1912, Theodore Roosevelt included the eight-hour workday in his campaign platform. In 1914, Ford Motor Company doubled pay and cut shifts from nine to eight hours, seeing an increase in productivity and subsequent profit margins. The Adamson Act of 1916 established an eight-hour workday with over time for railroad workers. The Supreme Court upheld the Act in 1917 in Wilson v. New. In 1937, 51 years after the Haymarket tragedy, Congress enacted the Fair Labor Standards Act which established a 40 hour workweek with over time as law of the land.

To appease the anti-communist Cold War mood in the country, in 1958, Congress declared May 1st as “Loyalty Day.” According to NPR, each President including Trump and dating back to Eisenhower has made a proclamation on May 1 as to what loyalty and individual liberty means to them. A Haymarket Memorial symbolizing the struggles of the working class, the right to public assembly, free speech, and the fight for the eight-hour workday is located at 175 N Desplaines St., Chicago, Illinois.