

National Council Digest

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President's Message

By Witold Skwierzynski

Budget Bill is Bad News

When the House of Representatives reconvenes on January 31st, one of the first orders of business will be to vote on a budget reconciliation bill. AFGE Council 220 has distributed literature on this bill to union activists urging them to quickly contact their congresspersons and urge them to vote against this bill because of the negative impact it will have on the poor, the working and middle class and federal agencies as well.

The budget reconciliation bill, if equated in terms of SSA staff, could cost us up to 5,000 jobs. Of course, we don't expect that kind of loss, but the agency must cut something. We expect the budget bill, if enacted, will therefore result in significant loss of overtime hours and other restrictions. In fact, we have already learned that SSA has imposed a hiring freeze and forbidden employees to process workloads like redeterminations and continuing disability reviews.

The idiocy of cutting programs like RZs and CDRs that actually save money for SSA is amazing. But, while Medicare Part D workloads increase, this budget prevents us from getting the staff to address it or the overtime to work it off! And, SSA will restrict leave usage during holidays for remaining employees because there aren't sufficient numbers to do the work that the agency doesn't sacrifice.

One would like to hear from SSA Commissioner Jo Anne Barnhart speaking against this budget and its adverse impact on the agency and those we provide service to. But, she was no where to be heard.

So, **we** need to be heard.

We need to contact our congresspersons now!

What follows is an assessment of some of the consequences of the budget reconciliation bill. You can use some of this material in communicating with your congresspersons. But, at the very least, contact your Washington representative and ask them to vote

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Frank Comito Resigns

Frank Comito, President of AFGE Local 2369 (New Jersey), resigned from the agency this week to take a job with the Federal Air Marshalls Service. Frank became president of the New Jersey Local in March, 2002 after serving as executive vice president since 1988. He has been either an executive officer or a local union representative since 1976. Frank's new position will be an employee relations specialist.

Frank summed up his legacy as a union official this way: "When I was packing up to leave the last couple of days, a number of members came up to me to thank me for what I had done for them as a union official. One member in particular thanked me for helping her even though she was not a member at that time. To me such *thank you's* are what makes this union job so rewarding, even though we may not hear the thanks often enough. Thus, I am proud that on behalf of the union I have been able to make a difference in making employee working conditions that much better than would be the case if we were not here and knowing that the employees appreciate us."

We wish Frank well in his new position!

Budget Bill (cont'd)

against the FY 2006 budget reconciliation bill. Please do this as soon as possible.

There will be people representing a variety of causes and concerns communicating with congress about this bill. We need to join the chorus and urge congress to support budget legislation that is fair to all Americans. Please do your part.

Budget Reconciliation Bill: *Analysis*

A little after 1:00 in the morning on December 19, 2005—just hours before congresspersons were scheduled to vote on it—a budget reconciliation bill surfaced on Capitol Hill. Many of the legislation's key provisions were altered behind closed doors during weekend negotiations and there was much confusion over the 774 pages that comprised the bill.

The House passed the bill, but a few minor changes by the Senate sends it back to the House for another vote.

SSA management says this legislation will result in a \$300 million loss for its operations while the agency must absorb all of its unfunded costs of Hurricane Katrina (e.g., employee and office dislocations and associated costs, employee support details for hurricane relief, office reconstruction, new facilities and equipment replacement, etc.). This reduction in funding is in addition to the White House cut of 2,059 work years. If all cuts were translated into staff, we could be losing up to 5,000 FTEs. Even if the cuts are not directed at personnel resources alone, it will prevent us from doing our work. SSA has imposed a hiring freeze and workloads like RZs and CDRs have already been suspended while management looks for additional work to sacrifice.

One area that appears to be on the block is overtime. Although, the president's budget increased the number of FTEs for Medicare modernization by 1,400 FTEs, overtime was cut from 4,559 in FY 2005 to 1,121 for FY 2006. Additional squeezing in the reconciliation bill suggests overtime may be the big loser in 2006.

Of course, SSA is not the only agency or program to suffer under this reconciliation bill. Here is a sampling of some of the cuts:

- € There were 25,000 slots for low-income children cut from Head Start
- € 255,000 kids will not be eligible for childcare
- € Cuts in Food Stamps and farm programs
- € Reduction in student loans
- € Community Development block grants reduced by \$777 million
- € EPS's state revolving fund for clean water reduced by \$243 million
- € Cuts in child support enforcement
- € Delays in certain SSI payments for up to a year for many poor individuals with disabilities
- € Gross reductions in Medicaid of \$11 billion over five years
- € Loss of revenues for foster care programs

Although some congresspersons claim that these cuts are needed to rein in budget deficits, the truth is they are being used to fund the war in Iraq and additional tax cuts that will go predominantly to the rich.

The reconciliation bill provides approximately \$50 billion in spending cuts, but this is offset by \$56 billion in tax cuts, which could rise to \$70 billion in a future conference agreement. Nearly \$40 billion of these cuts accrue to the richest 20 percent of American households. Middle and lower income families—the

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Budget Bill (cont'd)

bottom 60 percent of all families—lose more from program cuts than they gain from tax cuts.

Congress rammed this reconciliation bill through despite rules that prevent major legislation from being introduced without one day between filing and voting. The rules were waived to pave the way for a quick vote at about midnight on the Sunday night before the vote as a result of the House leadership's invoking *martial law!*

What You Can Do

Union representatives can use official time to contact their congresspersons to urge them **NOT** to support the budget reconciliation bill for fiscal 2006. The cuts in funding disproportionately affect low and working class Americans and deny federal agencies, like the Social Security Administration, the ability to do their work. To reduce funding for these essential programs at a time when Congress is also cutting taxes for the rich is unconscionable.

Union members cannot use agency time or equipment to contact their Washington representatives, nor can union reps use agency email to ask our members to lobby congress (see Article 11, Section 9 A 7).

But if you are concerned about a fair budget for all Americans, all AFGE representatives should contact their congresspersons as soon as possible and urge them to vote against the FY 2006 budget reconciliation bill.

You can also reach your congressperson by using the AFL-CIO toll-free hotline at 1-800-393-1082. Follow the prompts and you can be connected with your congressperson's office. When the phone is answered, identify yourself and where you live (to show that you are a constituent) and indicate that you are calling to urge your congressperson to vote against the FY 2006 budget reconciliation bill because it is unfair to the poor, working families and the middle class.



Council Reps Visit Hurricane Victims

(Mississippi and Louisiana) AFGE Council 220 President Witold Skwierczynski and 3rd Vice President Dana Duggins are visiting SSA offices in offices affected by Hurricane Katrina to offer assistance, listen to employees express their concerns, and to collect evidence for a national grievance.

Throughout the hurricane season, reports were received from affected employees about the agency's failure to follow federal guidelines regarding benefits for those affected by severe weather conditions, disparate treatment over subsistence allowances, details and hardship transfers; denied administrative leave, travel and per diem; exposure to hazardous working conditions; improper relocations, failure to provide relocation reimbursements, and more.

The Council will post photos of the damaged areas to its web site (www.afgec220.org).

“What we have heard consistently from office to office,” Dana Duggins said, “is that employees appreciate that we have come to meet with them since one of their biggest concerns has been the lack of information from SSA.” Duggins is concentrating on offices in Mississippi and Skwierczynski is visiting offices in Louisiana. A follow-up report will appear in a future Council 220 publication.

Addenda

Early Out To Be Offered Again

SSA is once again offering employees an *Early Out*. AFGE is negotiating a memorandum of understanding based on a draft *Early Out* notice that the agency has prepared. The MOU should be completed soon. The draft indicates that all employees who apply for the *Early Out* program will need to retire no later than September 2, 2006.

Transitions

Sherri Pemberton is the new Denver Regional Vice President for Council 220. She can be reached at c/o SSA, 1616 Champa St., Denver, CO 80204; phone: 1-800-690-5949.

Lollie Driulini is the new Dallas Regional Vice President. Her address is PO Box 1445, Houston, TX 77251; phone: 713-521-6404.

Winky New is now the Chicago Regional Vice President. Her address is c/o SSA, 215 Looney Road, Piqua, OH 45356; phone: 937-773-5443.

Andy Poulos is the new president of AFGE Local 3369 (NYC & Long Island). You can call him at 517-747-4926; c/o SSA, 211 Station Rd., 5th floor, Mineola, NY 11501.

Council Caucus Reminder

The Council 220 Caucus will be held in Baltimore following the AFGE Legislative Conference. The meeting will be located at the Wyndham Hotel on Friday, March 10 and Saturday, March 11, 2006. Members of the Council's Executive Committee will meet to discuss its operations and direction for the coming year.

Arbitration Numbers & Address

When sending a grievance to Jan Shpiegelman to invoke arbitration, you can fax it to Local 1923's office at 410-966-9761. Jan's address is:

AFGE Local 1923 c/o SSA
G314 West High Rise
6401 Security Blvd
Baltimore, MD 21235

Heads-Up on AFGE National Convention

A formal convention call will be issued in a future publication. But, for now we can tell you that the next national AFGE convention will be held at the Hyatt Regency Atlanta, 265 Peachtree St., NW, Atlanta, GA

30303; phone: 404-577-1234 from 8/7-8/11/06.

Medicare Part D—brought to you by Rube Goldberg

Rube Goldberg believed there were two ways to do things - the simple way and the hard way. And that, for some inexplicable reason, many people preferred doing things the hard way. His famous cartoons illustrated the tendency of human beings to exert maximum effort to achieve minimal results.

Notwithstanding the best of intentions, an influx of a mountain of taxpayer cash, the savings available to many low-income seniors, and the hard work of unfairly maligned federal staff, the Medicare drug benefit has become a Rube Goldberg cartoon.

Since passage of the Medicare Modernization Act (MMA) in December 2003, I have been warning about predictable surprises and inevitable consequences. The good news is I am batting 1000 on predictions. The bad news is I am batting 1000 on predictions. If it were not for the fact real people are affected, I'd be happy to sit back and gloat about my prescience. Or perhaps hire a skywriter to paint "I Told You So" high above Security Boulevard.

But truth is, this was easy to see and I was far from alone. While there are many flaws in the design of MMA and lost opportunities in the implementation, the most troubling problems revolve around the chaos and risks of transferring over six million vulnerable dual eligibles from Medicaid drug coverage to Medicare Part D. Virtually all of the other problems of Part D implementation can be ironed out with some more time, experience, and legislative tinkering.

[Editor's comment: The above assessment on Medicare Part D can be found in the Piper Report, Health Care Business & Policy, from Kevin B. Piper, Medicare and Medicaid Expert, at: <http://www.piperreport.com/>.

Another assessment was offered gratis by a federal judge I know while riding up the federal building elevator today. The judge's conclusion: "Medicare Part D is a mess!"

More information about why Medicare may be such a mess can be found by reading a third assessment offered by several members of congress at: http://www.truthout.org/docs_2006/012506Q.shtml]