

Contract Update - December 31, 2009

Despite numerous grievances, Unfair Labor Practices, and outrageous examples of management behavior, high-ranking officials with the Social Security Administration still believe the 2005 AFGE/SSA contract was a good one.

Union leaders recently had to deal with that intransigence when they met with agency officials to discuss portions of the National Agreement.

The discussions about Article 31, which concerns leave, are a good example of the positions that management negotiators will take during contract talks over the next several months.

When the Union's Chief Negotiator, Witold Skwierczynski, suggested that leave be divided into six-minute increments instead of 15, agency representative Jack Leiby responded in his usual way: 'SSA isn't interested in that.'

Skwierczynski later said the Union wants to expand and enhance employee leave issues which were taken out of the last contract. Leiby's response: No thanks.

Skwierczynski also suggested more use of email and other automated programs when employees call-in for leave. Leiby's answer: the agency wants to keep its 'direct contact' with the bargaining unit, and he wasn't sure if SSA was really interested in that idea.

Leiby also said emergency leave could be denied, even after Skwierczynski gave him this scenario: what would happen if he was going to work and was involved in a car accident? Leiby actually said Skwierczynski could ride a bicycle to work or have a friend drive him!

"This proves, once again, how extreme some management officials can be," said Dana Duggins, who participated in the talks and represented AFGE.

The 2005 contract also had reductions in the amount of annual leave that could be advanced. Union officials want those cuts restored but the agency doesn't.

"There's no reason for employees to suffer," Skwierczynski believes.

"We're very comfortable with the language in the contract," Leiby said. He also claimed that Article 31 "has worked very well for us (the agency) over the last four-plus years."

"I'm sure it's worked well for the agency," Duggins said, "because there are managers who berate and browbeat their employees into coming to work, even if they have family emergencies or are sick."

She also pointed out that most of the agency's contract representatives work in the Office of Labor-Management and Employee Relations (OLMER).

"OLMER's job is to advise managers on how to restrict employee benefits and how to get around the contract," Duggins said. "The vast majority have never worked with the public, let alone in a field office, TSC or in ODAR. They have no compassion or understanding for what an average employee goes through day after day, nor do they care."

The parties exchanged written proposals on Christmas Eve and Skwierczynski described the agency's proposals as "neanderthal." Electronic copies of those proposals will be available next week. AFGE negotiators will summarize a comparison of the articles received from SSA management and will make the electronic proposals available for all to see.

"It's important that employees see for themselves how much the Commissioner and SSA's management do not appreciate their hard work and the sacrifices they make to meet the public's needs," says James Marshall, AFGE's Deputy Chief Negotiator. "We need employees to understand that the Union is not 'crying wolf' when we report back about contract negotiation sessions and ask for their help."

"It is unfortunate and very disappointing that the Commissioner has solidified his lack of respect and appreciation for SSA employees," said Duggins.

