

December 1, 2009

Opening statement of Witold Skwierczynski,

Good morning.

The Union has been eagerly anticipating the opportunity to renegotiate a new contract with SSA management. The union is hopeful that the parties will engage in serious negotiations regarding the many issues that confront SSA and its employees. As the Agency takes on more responsibilities from Congress and significantly increases its workloads due to the recession and the aging of the baby boomers with insufficient staff, the impact of such workloads on employee stress must be dealt with by both Union and management at the negotiating table. In a survey that the Union conducted to assess the bargaining unit and determine the most important issues that they want us to address in this contract negotiations, employees responded that stress was their number one most important issue. Employees informed their AFGE representatives that they are unhappy with the way their managers dealt with SSA's increased workloads by shifting work and adding work, without employee input. They complained that SSA's increased workloads have adversely affected leave entitlements, breaks and lunches and numerous other work place issues. Over one half of the respondents wanted the award system revamped. Respondents indicated that the current appraisal system is unfair, biased and does not accurately assess employee job performance. They want it totally revamped. Employees indicated that the merit promotion system is severely broken in SSA. They expressed anger at SSA's decision to hire new employees at mid level and high level positions without offering equitable promotion opportunities to employees who are stagnated in grade, the veteran SSA workers. They bitterly criticized the wide spread SSA practice of using non-competitive hiring authority like FCIP, to hire management friends, relatives and associates to SSA positions, rather than to provide current qualified employees promotional opportunities. They complained about poor health and safety conditions in their offices and highlighted temperature conditions and poor air circulation as areas where they demanded relief. Employees demanded an expansion of alternative work schedules so they can have more freedom in determining their hours of work. 4/10 work schedules was the number 1 demand that employees requested in our survey. Employees criticized the training they were receiving from SSA. They demanded that the Union seek improvements in training in these contract negotiations. Employees also decried what they felt was a reduction in general employee rights. They asked the Union to strengthen these rights in negotiations. Employees also demanded that SSA greatly expand flexi-place opportunities for all SSA workers, not just the small percentage currently utilizing flexi place programs. Expansion of credit hours, equitable overtime, parking, annual leave and flexitime improvements also scored high in the employee survey. These are improvements that SSA workers want, and these are improvements that the Union will try to seek in these negotiations.

The Union also surveyed Union officials regarding their desires for contact negotiations. They expressed significant frustration regarding various institutional issues. Official Time was universally expressed as a problem - the lack of time that employees under this current contract have to do their representational jobs. Union representatives also complained about the EEO process. Many of their complaints were also about the lack of time that the agency allowed representatives to engage in EEO activities. They also complained about the skewed situation in EEO where accused EEO officials are treated as if they are innocent and they are also complained about the diminished role of the Union in EEO activity. Arbitration was a huge source of complaint. Specifically the sunset provisions and the side bar. Our Union representatives are very frustrated about the collective bargaining situation and midterm bargaining rights. SSA has failed to bargain many changes. SSA has failed to discuss changes. The current midterm bargaining article has very short time frames and has very little time to engage in collective bargaining. The biggest complaint was about the attitude of SSA negotiators when they do engage in bargaining and the attitude that is perceived by our union officials that Agency negotiators are not interested in good faith bargaining. The Union officials criticized their general lack of ability to have dialog with SSA officials about issues that affect their worksites. They criticize the fact of their diminished role in health and safety. They criticized the grievance procedure mainly because of the failure of management to make fair decisions. They criticized the fact that employees are not informed of their Weingarten rights and that, therefore, we cannot provide them with representation at moments of their work life when they most need it and the refusal of SSA to give adequate notice of formal discussions.

As a leader of the Union, I have observed a number of things during the term of the current contract that I believe need adjusting. The biggest issue is SSA's virtual elimination of meetings with the Union to discuss conditions of employment at various levels of the Agency. SSA's insulation of operational management from engaging with the union was deliberately done by the Agency to diminish the role of the union in representing employees. SSA's refusal to negotiate significant changes with the union needs to change. SSA's negotiating posture when negotiations are conducted is a problem that I have observed. SSA's treatment of union officials at all levels as unequal parties in the Union - Management relationship is shocking. The arrogance of many in SSA management regarding their attitude of superiority to the union and their ability to make unilateral changes without union involvement must change. SSA's manipulation of the technical aspects of the litigation process in order to avoid allowing SSA employees a methodology to resolve their complaints also must change. SSA's attacks against union officials which have been manifested in taking disciplinary actions against a number of union officials and even firing some of them has got to stop. SSA's ongoing crusade to weaken the union and reduce its institutional rights and benefits must cease. SSA's decision to ignore and delay responses to union correspondence, union information requests and union complaints about management misconduct is deplorable. SSA's refusal to engage with AFGE pre-decisionally on any issues must also change. There is no doubt from the Union's perspective that SSA took advantage of a favorable political climate during the last contract negotiations to reduce employee benefits and diminish the ability of the union to represent employees. This assault on employees and AFGE has left a bitter taste in our mouths.

Management's actions since the 2005 contract went into effect appeared to AFGE to indicate that SSA is not interested in dealing with the union in a meaningful way or dealing with employees in a fair manner. SSA employees have worked extremely hard in the last 4 plus years to keep the agency afloat. Despite inadequate staff, benefit cuts, inflexible management, a reduced voice in workplace decision making, cuts in their representatives institutional rights and diminished promotional opportunities, the SSA workforce, has done a magnificent job administering the SSA and SSI programs. It's time now for them to reap the rewards of their performance. The Union seeks through this bargaining a restoration of rights, regaining respect and preserving social security. The Union seeks not only restoration, but improvements in the contract. The climate has changed. The current Administration is open to unions in the Federal sector. A Partnership based executive order will be issued shortly and will force SSA management to change their attitudes. The Union intends to approach these negotiations in a hopeful spirit with the desire to reach a reasonable agreement. The Union will listen to and assess management's concerns. The workers that we represent care about SSA and its programs and demand that we assist in improving the work environment so they can do their jobs and so SSA can thrive and produce the services that the American public and Congress demand. We look forward to the negotiations and I hope that SSA will engage in good faith bargaining. The employees will be watching these negotiations closely. We intend to inform them throughout the bargaining regarding the progress of negotiations. Let's not disappoint them.