

STATEMENT BY

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COUNCIL 214**

BEFORE

**THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT OF GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT
THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
SENATE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS**

REGARDING

THE OVERLOOKED ASSET: THE DEFENSE CIVILIAN WORKFORCE

ON

MAY 12, 2003

Senator Voinovich:

My name is Jon Scott Blanch and I am the President of the American Federation of Government Employees Council 214, AFL-CIO. Council 214 represents, by far, the majority of bargaining unit employees employed by the U.S. Air Force in the Air Force Material Command. Council 214 consists of ten AFGE Local Union's at the following AFMC bases:

- Wright Patterson AFB, Ohio
- AFMETCAL Department, Heath, Ohio
- Tinker AFB, Oklahoma City
- Warner Robins AFB, Georgia
- Hill AFB, Utah
- Edwards AFB, California
- Kirtland AFB, New Mexico
- Eglin AFB, Florida
- Brooks AFB, Texas
- Logistics Support Office, Michigan

In all, the Council 214 bargaining unit totals out at approximately 36,000 AFMC workers across the Command. It is Council 214's role to address issues that have command-wide impact on bargaining unit employees the Council represents. This is accomplished through negotiations and collaboration at the AFMC/Council 214 level. For example, the master labor collective bargaining agreement between AFMC and AFGE Council 214 is negotiated at this level and is applied command-wide to the

Council 214 bargaining unit. Other examples are Air Force Instructions (AFI's), DOD manuals, AFMC supplements to AFI's or DOD manuals and AFMC policies that affect the working conditions of the 214 unit command-wide, or multiple bases of the command, are addressed at the AFMC/214 level and applied to the represented bargaining unit of the bases.

With that I mind, I deeply appreciate the opportunity to testify on behalf of the thousands of AFMC bargaining unit employees AFGE Council 214 is proud of and proud to represent. They are a vital, skilled and dedicated national asset, focused on one mission, that being to support this nation's war fighters through developing, modifying, testing, maintaining, and delivering the best weapons systems the world has ever known--in the past, now, and in the future.

What AFMC does is a team effort and the leadership of the AFMC team is exemplary. It is my opinion, and the opinion of AFGE National President Bobbie Harnage, that AFMC Commander, General Lester Lyles, and his senior staff, are the best there are in taking care of their employees, so they, the employees, can take care of the AFMC mission--military and civilian alike. And when we say the best, we mean the best in the entire federal sector.

In that spirit, AFGE Council 214 and AFMC work in partnership. Together, we have committed to develop and advocate the means to fully implement our labor/management partnership and to make AFMC an

exciting, productive and rewarding place for our people to live and work. AFMC is a huge, diversified, and complex command, as is the Council 214 bargaining unit structure. But we, AFMC and AFGE, have been and will continue to work in collaboration to meet our challenges now and in the future, both internal challenges and external challenges, where appropriate. AFMC may be able to do things independently. AFGE may be able to do things independently, but the parties recognize that by working together, when we have mutual interests, there is probably not much of anything we cannot accomplish. That is our race strategy, and we are committed to going the distance.

The instructions I received from in my invitation asked me to testify on five issues. The first three issues refer to Wright Patterson Air Force Base specifically. I will defer my testimony to the specifics at Wright Patterson to AFGE Local 1138 President, Pam McGinnis. I will testify to the same issues from an AFMC Command-wide Union perspective. I base this perspective on my personal knowledge and experience gained through AFMC/AFGE partnership activities and face-to-face discussions with bargaining unit employees and Local Union Leadership. As an original charter member of the AFMC/AFGE Partnership Council and now co-chair of that Council, it has been my privilege to visit every AFMC base that is represented by AFGE Council 214. Not only does our Partnership Council con-ops require the Council to rotate bases, but they also require that the Partnership Council be provided a mission briefing for the base we visit. I have received this briefing at every base. The Partnership Council is also provided a tour at each base

to allow us to see, up close and personal, what exactly the employees of that particular base do, how they do it, how they are working to improve the way they do it, and to tell us how they feel about the work they do. Valuable experience.

In my day-to-day dealings, I also receive the rest of the story through conversing with Local Union Leadership and disgruntled employees who may not feel comfortable airing their frustrations and complaints during the Partnership Council tours. I am also frequently approached, or approach management officials, to share concerns. If something is going on, either good or bad, that pertains to the bargaining unit, I hear about it, sooner or later, one way or another. Based on the above, I offer the following as my testimony in this hearing.

The Status of the AFMC Workforce

My opinion on the status of the AFMC civilian workforce is that they are ready, willing and able to handle anything thrown at them. History proves this. AFMC centers and operating locations have, for all intents and purposes, been in some level of surge capability since Desert Storm in 1991. Add to that the fact that during much of this timeframe, the AFMC workforce went through a very traumatic decade of downsizing and a BRAC decision to close two of the five ALC's and substantially downsize other locations and move the workload to the surviving bases. This was a monumental task to undertake, but the AFMC employees made it happen, while at the same

time, maintaining this nation's Air Force weapons systems. To be sure, the demands on the workforce were non-stop. They had to service weapons systems that flew in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and those that enforced the no-fly zone over Iraq for twelve years. And these planes were already old, but AFMC delivered and the war fighters accomplished their missions. 9-11 happened.

As a result, there were more demands placed on the war fighters, which AFMC is an integral part of. For months after 9-11, the Air Force provided air cover over Washington, D.C. and other major metropolises of the United States, non-stop. At the same time Air Force weapons systems were being serviced by AFMC and delivered to the war fighters to do battle against Al-Queda and the Taliban. AFMC accomplished its mission and the war fighters accomplished theirs. Even as that conflict continued, AFMC workers were surging in preparation for the inevitable war with Iraq. AFMC again accomplished its mission resoundingly, as did the United States Air Forces.

The AFMC workforce, indeed the entire defense civilian workforce, are definitely an overlooked asset. Consider objectively the constant distractions they have had to deal with. Hundreds, if not thousands, of AFMC employees voluntarily pulled up roots, relocated their families as a result of downsizing and BRAC. They are under constant threat of losing their jobs to contractors, often without being given an opportunity even to compete in defense of their jobs.

Recently, the Air Force, out of the blue, for reasons unstated and unknown, announced that AFMC would have to eliminate thousands of jobs due to “arbitrary manpower cuts” in 2003 and 2004. So, there we were. The AFMC workforce was working around the clock to support an ongoing war against terrorism and the upcoming war in Iraq, and they are told that an “arbitrary reduction in force” is looming. It is very disconcerting. However, the Administration’s Defense Transformation Act’s new “National Security Personnel System” makes a disconcerting situation infinitely worse. In that legislation, which last week was marked up in the House of Representatives, the Secretary of Defense will have the authority to rewrite the RIF rules every time they conduct a RIF. Currently, both seniority, employment status, and performance factors are considered when a RIF is conducted. What factors will be considered now? I am outraged over the possibility that if this legislation passes the Senate, supervisors will have the authority to pick and choose who loses his job from a RIF and who stays on. I ask you to make sure that there are rules written into law that force managers to consider all these factors – and explicitly protects against discrimination so that a RIF can’t be used just to root out those who aren’t the favorites or political cronies of whichever party is in power at a particular time.

The attacks against civilian DoD workers go on and on. The Administration’s announcement to contract out 850,000 federal employees’ jobs creates enormous stress on the workers – and sends an unmistakable message that no matter how much loyalty is given by workers, no loyalty

whatsoever will be shown in return. The Secretary of Defense announcement that the next round of BRAC will be bigger than all previous rounds combined really strikes hard on the morale in this command because our employees have been there and done that. And now, with victories, and I might add, lop-sided victories, over this nation's current enemies within our grasp, the war fighters are being given a heroic and well-deserved welcome home and job well done from the Administration, the Congress and the American people. The civilian defense workforce in AFMC, on the other hand, is again going into a surge mode to overhaul, repair, upgrade and replenish the weapons systems as a result of the stresses the war's placed them under. To my knowledge, the only well done this workforce has received has been from the AFMC commanders. Everybody else overlooked us, with the exception of the Secretary of Defense. His reaction to our unwavering support of the war fighters was to introduce legislation that will punish the workforce that has just made a crucial and extraordinary contribution to our victories.

If the Secretary of Defense gets his way and you, Senator Voinovich, go along with him, then the thanks the civilian workforce will get will be "goodbye" to your annual pay raise passed by the Congress, and "hello" to total and sole authority to decide whether anyone ever gets a raise going to the supervisor. This is an outrage and I ask you, Senator Voinovich, to give us your word that you will not allow such broad power to the supervisors. Congress has a duty to show its support of the civilian workforce by making sure that our pay is adequate to raise our families. Costs go up every year,

and we rely on that Congressionally passed pay raise each year to make ends meet. Do not let the Secretary of Defense say that national security or poor performers are a good enough reason to deny all of us our hard-earned pay adjustments.

This Union is very proud of this workforces' contribution and the employees are devastated when they learn that the Pentagon leaders intend to reward this effort by stripping them of their civil service protections. The answer to the status of the AFMC workforce question-- they are proven performers, flexible, dedicated, proud, and up to each and every challenge. The fruits of their labor speak for themselves. We work every day to protect democratic rights, only to have the Congress vote to take away those rights and give all power to the Secretary of Defense and the supervisors. That is morally wrong, and I ask you to vote against stripping us of our basic rights in the ways contained in DoD's National Security Personnel System legislation.

Workforce Shaping

In response to the Senator's inquiry as to the effect of voluntary early retirements and voluntary separation incentive payments in AFMC, I offer the following:

While I am aware AFMC uses these as incentives, they are not something the 214 bargaining unit sees much of. The reasons, in my

opinion, are that these employees are primarily blue collar, wage grade employees and GS employees who provide the production workers direct or indirect support at the centers and operating locations. I also believe that while these incentives are a good thing for employees, the times are not conducive to giving financial incentives to the people who assure that AFMC's mission is accomplished to leave the service. What about the famous "human capital crisis"?

I am also aware that AFMC is having a very difficult time filling needed vacancies due to the new Modern Personnel System, or Modern System. This thing has more bugs than a swarm of locusts and I have been informed that it is adversely impacting the mission. Workforce shaping initiatives are an issue that the AFMC/AFGE Partnership Council have identified as a mutual interest and we are working together on many aspects we agree on. Some, we do not. And, while current events have placed these issues on the back burner, they are still on our agenda. There is one thing that I see over and over again, which frankly, bothers me about the incentives. I don't understand why people are paid \$25,000 to leave the government and then see the same people back working at the same job, often in the same job series, working as a contractor. If this is to soften the blow of mandatory privatization quotas, perhaps you should reconsider the mandatory privatization quotas. That would be better for the Defense Department, the taxpayer, the war fighter, and the worker – it would be better for everyone but the contractor.

Proposed Reductions

I believe I have addressed this concern in my previous testimony and opening. However, to affirm that at this time it seems inane to reduce the AFMC civilian workforce. The Air Logistics Centers are desperately in need of mechanics, which they have trouble hiring because the wage rates they are offering are too low. It is my understanding that due to this, the ALC's are hiring contractors to subsidize the federal workforce, at a higher hourly cost, because they cannot get federal employees on board. AFMC is training this contractor workforce and when the contracted workers get up to speed, they are informed to apply for the federal position and they are eventually hired by the centers as federal employees. But it takes way too much time and way too much effort. An interesting observation is that these contracted employees jump at the chance to become federal workers. They do apply and accept the federal job over the private sector. The reasons why are federal jobs are still viewed as good job, with good benefits, upward mobility, and a fair system to work in. Of course, none of that will be true if DoD's National Security Personnel System goes forward. It will not be a fair system, and no one knows what will happen to the pay system or chances for upward mobility. In fact, everything could and would change with each new Secretary of Defense.

On the up side, if there is one, when I was originally briefed on the Air Force directive for AFMC to implement a mandatory "arbitrary reduction in

force,” I was informed that the only AFMC base that would actually suffer any loss of jobs as a result of the RIF would be Wright-Patterson. Hill AFB, at the time of the announcement, was sitting on over 800 authorized vacancies because of the Modern System. Upon hearing this, it was this Council’s position that these vacancies be used in lieu of separations at Wright-Patterson to prevent our people from being arbitrarily separated. It didn’t make sense to me to be arbitrarily laying off our people at one base who had years of service, while at other AFMC bases, we were attempting to hire people with no federal experience off the streets. It is my understanding that this approach was adopted by AFMC and that there will be no separations in ’03 as a result. This is a prime example of the AFMC Commander’s commitment to take care of the people so they can take care of the mission. However, 2004 reductions still loom and it is a challenge we will work together as partners. We would appreciate any help the Senator could provide in correcting the Modern System.

Possible Changes in Law that Would Enhance AFMC’s Ability to Manage Its Civilian Workforce

There is not a shred of truth to the claim that Pentagon needs total unreviewable discretion over everything – from hiring, firing, discipline, pay, collective bargaining – everything, in order to manage its civilian workforce. Their bill is union-busting pure and simple. The people who actually work in this Command know this. They do not need total centralized control with no ability for anyone to hold them accountable. If this were not a totally political

effort to destroy unions and allow Defense Secretaries to move money around to political favorites – through jobs and contracts, the solution to any problems DoD is having with its civilian workforce would be obvious. They need to fund FEPCA!

If FEPCA was fully funded, there would not be a requirement for pay banding. We keep hearing that DOD needs to become more agile in order to carry out its mission. They have all the legal authority they could ever want to carry out their mission – and they know it. At the very same time, that DOD did carry out its mission and has been carrying out its mission in a sustained superior manner, based on sustained superior performance from both the military and their federal civilian defense workers for decades. I keep hearing and reading the old wife's tale that it is too burdensome and complicated to deal with unacceptable performance or to take discipline against employees. I don't know who professes to this false and ridiculous myth, but I can assure you that in the AFMC bargaining unit, unacceptable performance is not condoned and employees suffer the consequences if their performance is not acceptable. If an employee commits a violation of any law, rule or regulation, those employees in the bargaining unit are held accountable.

AFMC processes thousands of adverse actions every year against employees alleged to be unacceptable in their job performance or for allegedly violating the workplace rules, up to and including removing these

employees. So I don't know why the existing laws concerning these issues need to be changed.

Moreover, this Council, through its Locals, is very effective in defending employees who are victims of unjustified performance-based and disciplinary actions. If supervisors were not human, and never made a mistake or acted unjustly, there would be no need for due process rights for workers. But they are human and they do make mistakes. The facts are that there are way too many actions taken against employees that are not supported by facts – or even by the agency and without the current due process in place now, these employees would have been victims of injustice. If you care at all about justice, and making sure that victims of discrimination or false accusations have their “day in court” then you will oppose DoD's bill that takes away all due process rights from civilian employees.

As to other changes to law, we would expect a level playing field in workload competition. We would expect that national security not be contracted out to the lowest bidder – or to the highest bidder with the right political connections. We would like contractor accountability. We believe that this nation's weapons systems must be maintained by the federal employees in federal installations, without having these employees under constant threat of losing their jobs to God know who or what about. We believe that collective bargaining in the federal sector is in the public's interest and that labor and management working together is the way to compete in today's world. We must maintain this relationship in DOD. The

employees in AFMC are relied on by the war fighters. The war fighters are their customer. They must listen to their customer and they must be able to communicate back to their customer. Collective bargaining and working together as partners allows this communication to take place. It must, in the name of national security, be maintained. It must also be maintained in the name of quality and efficiency of the service to the tax payers.

As an example, AFMC recently took on a major initiative called “Back to Basics.” The Union was brought in at the outset and was involved in every aspect of implementing this program. And it was a good thing because while there were some great ideas put forth by the powers in the Pentagon to make back to basics happen, there were also some really inane proposals that would have been implemented but for the Union’s voice on behalf of the workers. The tool control Air Force Instruction is one that comes to mind. In the aircraft maintenance arena, where back to basics was originally targeted, there are three main skills: aircraft structural mechanics, aircraft electricians, and aircraft general mechanics. And while these skills are the same across the arena, it must be noted that they are employed on different systems. For example, you have F-16 structural mechanics, C-130 structural mechanics, and A-10 structural mechanics. What happened with the tool control AFI in back to basics is that someone, with no knowledge of what goes on in the aircraft hangars across this command, decided that all tool kits, by skill, would be generic in issue and would be required to be arranged in the mechanics’ tool kits exactly the same. The reason for this was to allow a quality inspector, who inspected the kits once a year, to have

an easier job, while at the same time, causing the line mechanics inefficiency every other day of the year because he or she would not arrange their tools in the most efficient manner. A C-130 mechanic might use a big hammer every day, so he would put that hammer in the top drawer. An F-16 mechanic would very seldom use a hammer, so he would put the hammer in the bottom drawer. Thus, they would both have an efficient layout and they would be more efficient. We had to fight for that and we prevailed because we were in this together.

Another example is information technology. Again, a big percentage of the Council 214 workforce are blue collar. They are trained to work on machines. Whether they be aircraft, missiles, lathes, heavy machinery, forklifts, or components of machines, that's what they are paid to do and are required to do. But what is happening again is that someone in the bureaucracy, who knows nothing about the real blue collar world, has somehow decided that all of these workers sit at a computer terminal. Therefore, they have eliminated all of the people that used to support these workers and made this support self-service for the workers electronically. Where workers could once update their entitlements and benefits by simply going to the Entitlements and Benefits Office and working with someone to make a change, they must now go find an available computer terminal and access a web site to make any changes. This hurts the mission because many do not have computer access, computer literacy, or the time away from work to do this.

Where these workers once were automatically considered for promotions based on their experience and qualifications, they must now go to a web site and search for promotions. Then, if they find a job they are interested in, they must self-nominate electronically. But again, they do not have the access, the computer skills, or the time away from their job without adverse repercussions on the mission. This issue is only going to get worse unless it is dealt with. And that's what this Union and this Command are doing--taking care of our people so they can take care of the mission. We believe if this self-service wave of the future is going to continue, and we know it is, we must address these concerns together and any support, morally or legislatively, would be appreciated.

I would be happy to answer any questions the Senator has.

Thank you,

J. Scott Blanch
President
AFGE Council 214