

DCMA and AFGE Council 170 — A Long-Lasting Partnership

by Ms. Carolina Woods, Staff Writer



The Defense Contract Management Agency (DCMA) and its labor union, Council 170 of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), finalized and signed the long-awaited collective bargaining agreement on Jan. 11, 2006. The agreement, which officially went into effect on April 3, 2006, is in place for five years and applies to nearly 10,000 non-management DCMA employees eligible to be members of a “bargaining unit” — a group of employees represented by a labor union. AFGE Council 170, which comprises 31 AFGE locals within DCMA, signed the agreement on behalf of the bargaining unit as the designated representative.

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Prior to signing the new agreement, DCMA had three separate unions that operated within the Agency. Since each one of these unions had its own agreement and supplements, it became very cumbersome for Agency leaders, supervisors and union members to understand

and manage these separate agreements. The new Agency-wide collective bargaining agreement is a consolidation of the best clauses of the three pre-existing agreements in addition to other collective bargaining agreements and does not require any supplementation. The new agreement has helped streamline the responses to labor union issues facing the Agency, since all the necessary information has been standardized and can now be found in one place. “We looked at streamlining things [in terms of] time and money considerations because the union and the Agency split the costs of dealing with issues. It’s in everybody’s best interest to streamline it or make it go as quickly as possible,” DCMA’s Senior Associate General Counsel Ms. Carolyn Perry, Ethics and Personnel, explained. Mr. Tom Maahs, president of AFGE Council 170 and AFGE Local 2121, agrees with the importance of streamlining the process: “The Agency is no longer divided, one organization doing [things] one way and another organization doing [them] another. It has given us consistency.”

According to Ms. Perry, the most significant changes reflected in the new agreement include the number of dedicated union representatives in the Agency, which is now 16, the new grievance procedure and the new article on alternate dispute resolutions. “Streamlining the grievance process into two steps rather than three has made the grievance process much faster since now you pretty much know what is going to happen fairly early,” she said. The new article

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on alternate dispute resolution allows issues to go in front of a third party prior to being presented in a formal hearing and changed the method of selecting arbitrators. Arbitrators can now identify problems or procedural defects that could cause a case to be dismissed. If an arbitrator's decision is that there is a procedural defect in a case and the case is dismissed, the procedure ends and there is no need to move forward with a formal hearing. As Ms. Perry pointed out, "This provision prevents a lot of resources being spent to present a case that might be procedurally flawed ... [because] the flaws are identified before going through the process."

A few of the most critical issues addressed by the new collective bargaining agreement include: physical exercise time, teleworking, travel and compensatory time and compressed work schedules. When the details of the agreement were still being discussed prior to finalization, exercise time became one of the key issues bargaining unit members requested the AFGE Council 170 negotiate on their behalf. The importance of this issue was further

emphasized during the first supervisors' training session. In fact, the idea of exercise time became so popular that it was also extended to non-bargaining unit employees. "Senior management decided that if this was good enough for the majority of the employees — there are probably 9,000 employees in the bargaining unit — the other 1,800 or so should have it, too," Ms. Perry explained.

There are other new policies that have been extended to non-bargaining unit employees, though the collective bargaining agreement applies to bargaining unit employees only. As the agreement stands, management personnel may join the union and take advantage of its benefits, but they cannot seek union representation should an issue arise. As Ms. Perry explained, "There is an administrative grievance procedure that applies to all non-bargaining unit employees, and that is what [management personnel] would have to use."

The AFGE Council 170 has been holding training seminars for supervisors and leaders to make them aware of what is included in the new agreement and each party's responsibilities. "[The training], in all sincerity, is to educate management and the union on the new agreement because there are some changes over what we had in our previous agreements," Mr. Maahs said. "We brought [supervisors and union representatives] in to demonstrate that this [agreement] was a joint effort by both labor and management, to present one face to everybody ... because this is our governing document for the next five

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(Above) Mr. Tom Maahs, president of AFGE Council 170 and AFGE Local 2121, at DCMA Headquarters in Alexandria, Va. (DCMA staff photo)

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years,” he added. Furthermore, supervisors and managers need to clearly understand what their responsibilities entail since all requests have to go through them. For example, “employees have to request permission for their leave, they have to request permission for their work schedules and they have to inform their supervisors that they want to talk to a union rep. These are things that were always there before, but they just seem to have fallen through or off the radar,” Mr. Maahs explained. “And when you’ve got constant change in the Agency ... [and] people moving around, people don’t know or lose sight of just exactly who’s responsible for what,” he continued. To remedy this problem, the new collective bargaining agreement delineates the division of responsibilities in three different parts — for management, union representatives and bargaining unit employees — and the training reinforced the criticality of understating this three-level approach. The training also focused on the importance

of communication. As Mr. Maahs reiterated, “We told them in training to communicate, communicate, communicate. Keep the lines of communication open, keep everybody informed, and when you do, most of your issues aren’t issues.”

It is crucial for employees, as members of a bargaining unit, to realize that all issues need to be dealt with through the union. All the information that employees need is included in the agreement, from requesting leave, to handling details and reassignments, to knowing their rights. As such, the primary and most important action bargaining unit employees need to take is to read the collective bargaining agreement and become familiar with the new processes. Understanding the agreement thoroughly will minimize the number of grievances and will allow bargaining unit employees

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to recognize violations, which will in turn expedite the grievance process.

So far, the new agreement has been successful, as the majority of employees have reacted favorably to the changes and new provisions. Part of this success is attributed to the negotiation team's thorough research of key issues and to the way in which they crafted the agreement to provide as much flexibility as possible to all parties involved. Employees are particularly pleased with the results regarding the exercise time and telework programs. For example, the Agency has agreed to provide 200 computers for employees who request to telework and are approved by their supervisors. However, it seems most people realize the agreement remains a work in progress and that there is a long road still ahead. “It has been a cultural change, an adjustment period for both union and management,” Ms. Perry commented, adding, “Issues that were previously negotiated at the local level are now handled at Headquarters because there is now one bargaining unit.” Representatives at the local levels do not have the same level of negotiation

authority they once had under the previous agreements. Similarly, this has also been an adjustment for commanders, whose authority to negotiate is now very limited. There are only approximately five issues that can be negotiated locally, and issues not approved for local negotiation must go through Headquarters and the Council for approval. Despite the challenges that are still present, the increased number of successful outcomes compared to the outcomes from the previous three agreements is a clear sign of everyone's willingness to work together to reach the best outcomes for all parties. As Ms. Perry remarked, “We own this agreement together ... it's not our agreement, and it's not the union's agreement — it is our agreement.”

In order to assist with the transition, DCMA Headquarters is compiling a series of training materials that will be available for employees to review. These resources include a computer-based training program that will allow employees to sit at their desks and review the key issues of the agreement and a list of frequently asked questions gathered at the supervisors' training sessions that will be available on the DCMA Web site. In addition, through the DCMA Web site, employees now have access to a videotaped two-day training session that took place in Los Angeles, Calif., and to the presentation materials that were used during the sessions. A downloadable version of the new collective bargaining agreement can be found on the DCMA Web site at: <http://home.dcma.mil/dcmam/RayTucson/AFGE/CBA%202006.pdf>. Further information, along with a list of DCMA offices and their corresponding locals, can be found on the DCMA Web site, which will be periodically updated to reflect new information as it becomes available.

(Above) DCMA's Senior Associate General Counsel Ms. Carolyn Perry, Ethics and Personnel (DCMA staff photo)