



# LOCAL 3197

SHOUT!  
May-June 2005

*Representing employees of the Seattle VA, VA Regional Office, Seattle Vet Center, Bremerton Pre-separation Center, Bremerton CBOC, and Metropolitan Park*

From the Editor  
What's the Problem with the VA Budget?

Despite our Nurse Executive's exhortation that veterans should not be "burdened with our issues," neither the VA nor veterans can pretend there's no problem or that it does not impact us all. What's interesting is how it is explained. At Jim McDermott's informational town hall meeting "Coming Home from a Different Kind of War" (April 30 at the Jefferson Park Community Center), Director of Health Plan Management John Park was compelled to acknowledge the funding problem, which he explained by citing three main "dynamics": staffing with annual payraises (constituting 70% of the budget); the cost of supplies and services; and the increasing number of veterans seeking care. In other words, to find the culprit, you have to look downstream.

This habit goes all the way to the top. Jim Nicholson, the new Secretary for Veterans Affairs, has said that, with prudent use of existing funds, the VA has all the money it needs to get through the fiscal year. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson argued against a proposed \$2 billion addition to the 2005 VA budget by stating: "It isn't that we don't have the money . . . It's that we have a management problem." And Steve Buyers, the Chair of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, subsequently suggested that the VA should "start acting like a business and create a corporate culture of accountability that rewards success and penalizes failure."

That raises some problems. First, to apply the idea of corporate accountability to a public service does not make sense. Corporations are accountable to shareholders. Like all federal agencies, the VA is

supposed to be accountable to the public (in this case, the veteran public) - we are not in it for profit. Second, how are success and failure defined in this context? We know we do a great job taking care of the veterans who access our services. Is Buyers suggesting that we should be more effective at screening out veterans whose needs are less acute or are not deemed service connected? Or is he referring to the infamous waiting times? And what will be the penalty for these failures? More funding cuts? You can't say we aren't trying. At VA Puget Sound, the entire staff are asked to think of ways for the agency to save money. I suggested a 20% pay cut for all administrators earning \$80,000 or more. This could save enough to hire more nurses and physicians. My idea did not appear on the list that was published to our service - eliminating overtime for RNs did. (Maybe we do have a management problem.)

What do we see when we look "upstream"? We see tax cuts for wealthy families and corporations - who became rich utilizing the public infrastructure and labor force - and we see the "global war on terror." These two factors guarantee that the resources available for public services will continue to shrink. But in our two-party winner-take-all political system, any argument or objection to the prevailing orthodoxy may immediately be labeled partisan. So given the Hatch Act prohibition against partisan activity in federal agencies, we know that the hard questions about economic justice will NOT be raised here.

Educating veterans could be dangerous. A large fresh supply of them is on the way, and they will not be afraid to ask hard questions.

—Bianca P lank

Email your letters to [bianfran@earthlink.net](mailto:bianfran@earthlink.net)

## Letter from the Local President, May 2005

Dear Members and Friends of the Local,

These are tumultuous times for the world, our country, organized labor, and federal workers. On May 12th, the VA walked out on the negotiations they had initiated over the Master Agreement between DVA and AFGE. Their statement said they cannot work with the Union, and the contract will remain in effect until someday when agreement is reached on a new one. As our contract is one of the best labor agreements in the federal sector, this is good news for VA employees in the bargaining unit. For our Local to continue to build representational strength at the Seattle VA, VARO, and all seven remote sites, increasing our membership is critical. If your co-worker(s) are not members of the union, spread the message: **Employee rights in the workplace exist because of civil service law passed in 1978, shepherded through Congress by AFGE.** If such a large proportion of our bargaining unit (almost 70%) fails to support the union, it will be very easy for us to lose these rights in the years to come.

Recent Local 3197 successes include fighting back VARO management's plan to change the work hours of almost every single employee; and at the VA, stopping management from imposing a new weekend coverage using comp time for one group of professional employees. In an effort to save money, some managers are attempting to change work conditions for employees. By our contract, management must notify the union local of proposed changes so we can bargain over the impact of those changes on employees. In many cases management does not notify the union. **If you are notified of a change in your work, or work hours that changes your work conditions, notify a local union official.** And remember, our strength and effectiveness in advocating on behalf of the employees we represent, depends on our membership strength.

Other agencies in the federal workforce are in rougher water than VA: Social Security (SSA), Department of Defense (DoD), and Department of Homeland Security (DHS). AFGE workers at the SSA have finished negotiating their new contract - with big losses for the employees. It is going before the membership nationwide for ratification and may well be voted down.

DoD civilian workers, the majority represented by AFGE, are asking for help from us to fight the National

Security Personnel System (NSPS), which would eliminate civil service rights, whistleblower protections, and fair pay standards.

Our DoD Brothers and Sisters implore us to call our Senators and Representatives in Congress, via toll free number 1-800-355-3588, and ask them to contact Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and demand a fair set of personnel rules at DoD. There is more information at [www.afge.org](http://www.afge.org) or call toll free 800-701-9792. What goes down in the DoD will soon be knocking at the door of the VA.

**Sister AFGE Local 1502, representing the employees of Madigan Army Hospital, is holding an Informational Picket on NSPS, "Bad for our Country and Federal Workers," on Friday, June 3 from 7 AM to 9 AM, Logistics Gate (off Thorne exit, I-5).** Local 1502 President Mike Clarke is working with Pierce County Central Labor Council and WA State Jobs with Justice on this mobilization. For carpooling information call the union office, 206-764-2737..

At the recent District Caucus, I spoke with a union leader in the DHS, Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS, but now referred to as "ICE"). This Local President relayed how management is imposing changes in work conditions in open repudiation of their contract, and saying, "You have a union now, but NOT FOR LONG." Morale is in the gutter and there is the appearance of an attack on long time employees, who are accustomed to respect in the workplace.

In this region's labor scene, the King County Labor Council is sponsoring a visit to Seattle of Iraqi labor leaders. Iraq has a long history of trade unionism, in both private and public sectors. "Iraqi trade unionists struggled for years under Saddam's repression, and now have stepped forward to organize workers under the difficult circumstances of violence and occupation" (excerpt from resolution passed by King County Labor Council 4-20-05). There will be a lunch with the Iraqi labor delegation at the Seattle Labor Temple on June 23. Call KCLC at 206-441-8510 for more information.

Social Security is facing a concerted attack (the SSA Trust Fund has too much money, the Administration must fix that) on the benefit plan Americans depend on. **Come to the local union office and sign the petition to protect Social Security from privatization.**

Thank you all for the work you do.

In solidarity, Barbara Phinney, RN ■

## **AFGE 11th District Caucus, Denver, CO**

—Barbara Phinney

### **On May 13, AFGE-National VA Council 249**

(representing VA facilities in Washington, Idaho, Oregon and Alaska) held a business meeting and election of officers. Attending from Local 3197 were delegates Debra Smith, Gilbert Whitman and Barbara Phinney (by virtue of office). The day was spent in committee work: Audit, Budget, Credentials, etc. We participated in the work, learning and networking with the delegates from other VA's. Election results were as follows: Don Fowler was re-elected Council President; Kevin McGee (Local President at Anchorage VA/RO) was elected Vice President; Bill Hainsey (Local President at Vancouver VA) was re-elected Treasurer, and Linda Davis (Local President at Portland VA) was elected Secretary. A sampling of current VA issues includes VA Police staffing, hardship for workers across the board with the hiring freeze, and increased severity of discipline across the VISN in conjunction with a stated goal of losing 500 more FTEE's throughout the VISN this fiscal year (ending 9/30/05).

**On May 14, the AFGE District Eleven Caucus** was held with AFGE locals from all agencies in the District. Election results were as follows: Gerry Swanke, the incumbent, was re-elected National Vice President by acclamation. He gave a rousing speech which included the call: "Civilian Department of Defense Workers are Protection, NOT THE THREAT... America, isn't it time to protect those protecting you?"

Brother Kevin McGee, longtime Local President of 3028, Anchorage, was elected by acclamation to the post of Fair Practice Coordinator, and promised to offer needed training to the District. Sister Robin Bates of the Denver Mint local was elected Womens' Coordinator, and pledged to work hard with Kevin to bring training and fight for equality in the workplace for ALL employees.

The atmosphere was mostly cooperative and friendly. There was general agreement that with the threat to unionized federal workers from privatization, budgetary constraints, and general union-busting in the name of national security, we had better stick together. Building our membership and being aware of our rights on the job as civil servants, and holding onto them, may get us through. ■

## **Report from the Law Enforcement Steering Committee**

—Officer Johnny Walker

I want to thank you for selecting me to attend the Law Enforcement Steering Committee meeting in Washington, DC. Although I worked harder than I would have if I'd stayed home, it was extremely rewarding and I am a better, wiser person for it. The first day mostly consisted of updating the committee on the outstanding issues facing AFGE workers as a whole and specific issues facing Police Officers in the 0083 series. We also underwent an extensive training session on the finer points of lobbying. The second day of the trip consisted of more updates and the committee participated in an informational picket in front of the Reagan Building.

The informational picket was designed to enlighten the public, and anyone else who'd listen, on the proposed DoD rating system commonly known as the NSPS. DoD is attempting to go forward with the system and if they're successful it could possibly affect the remaining segments of Government Employees in the very near future. After the informational picket we were teamed up with experienced lobbyists and we actually went to Capitol Hill and walked the hallowed halls trying to gain co-sponsors to the proposed HR-1002, Law Enforcement Pay and Retirement Bill.

My team contacted approximately 20 Congresspersons or their staff, which included the Representatives from this great state. I'd learned that two of this state's Reps are currently co-sponsors of the bill and feel that since Mr. Reichert is a former Sheriff of King County, he would most likely be supportive of the bill. The third day consisted of more updates and a second lobbying session on Capitol Hill.

At the conclusion of the third day I had to return home, but the committee members that were able to stay attended a candlelight memorial for the fallen Law Enforcement Officers across this nation. The District of Columbia is an extremely Police-friendly area and I felt very comfortable amongst my peers. Thank you again for selecting me as Local 3197's representative. I attempted to give the local its money's worth. ■

**CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS UPDATE**  
**from Alma L. Lee, NVAC President**  
**April 15, 2005**

Dear Union Activists:

As you are aware, VA suspended the Master Agreement contract negotiations. VA filed a ULP with FLRA against the AFGE/NVAC for us not giving them all of our articles at one time. The FLRA dismissed their complaint and we won! VA appealed that decision to the FLRA. Again, FLRA dismissed their complaint, on February 6, 2005, and we won again. VA has once again appealed the decision to the FLRA General Counsel. We are currently waiting on a response.

The NVAC filed a grievance on VA for not initialing off on articles to which both sides (labor and management) had agreed upon. The NVAC lost that grievance, which basically said we don't have to initial off at the time of consensus. We did not appeal that decision because we saw some advantage for us on that decision.

VA had requested, months ago, during the time we were at the table to negotiate the contract that we also look at negotiating the 5-tier Performance Appraisal System outside of the contract. At that time, VA had already given us their proposal on the Performance Appraisal System, so we (the Negotiating Team), decided that we would not negotiate the 5-tier Performance Appraisal System outside of the contract.

Since that time, VA has come back again requesting to negotiate the 5-tier Performance Appraisal System outside of our regular contract negotiations. Managers and other unions (not AFGE) are currently under the 5-tier system.

VA has requested the following from AFGE/NVAC:

1. That we come up with a plan to restart negotiations; and;
2. We negotiate the 5-tier Performance Appraisal System now.

After thoroughly discussing this with the Executive Board and the Negotiating Team, we have **proposed** the following to VA:

1. Roll the contract over for three (3) years;
2. Official and/or duty time amounts for all AFGE/NVAC positions, including locals, shall not be reduced below the current negotiated amounts and/or past practice amounts;

3. This provision shall last as long as the roll over of the Master Agreement;
4. AFGE/NVAC will negotiate the 5-tier Performance Appraisal System, as well as the Employee Recognition and Awards, as soon as management and labor can concur upon a mutually agreeable time to meet.

The rationale behind our **proposal** is;

1. The climate for unions and the current administration is not good.
2. When Social Security was in negotiations, they lost 100 positions that were on 100% official time. Social Security now has 14 people on 100% nationwide. Their negotiations are complete.
3. HEPA now has four people on 100% nationwide.
4. Social Security no longer has Mid-Term Bargaining.
5. The UAN contract for Title 38, that has been completed, does NOT look good.

The Labor and Management Negotiating Teams will be meeting on May 10th through May 11th, 2005 to decide on where we will go with negotiations.

So, we ask that you bear with us and support us as we get back into the negotiating process!

Sincerely and In Solidarity,

Alma L. Lee, President  
National Veterans Affairs Council, #53  
American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO■

**In AFGE's fight for federal employees' pay,  
benefits and rights at work,  
AFGE-PAC is a critical ingredient.**

Who gets elected and how they vote is a very big deal for federal employees. Your Representatives and Senators vote on your wages, benefits and rights to work. They vote on the rules for contracting out. They vote on the budget that determines whether or not your agency is underfunded and/or understaffed. That's why we have AFGE-PAC. AFGE-PAC's sole purpose is to help elect lawmakers - Democrats or Republicans - who value the work of federal employees and the services we provide. In these difficult times for federal employees, AFGE-PAC increases your power to hold our lawmakers accountable. Contribute to AFGE-PAC. You can obtain forms to sign up for regular PAC contributions (as low as \$1 per month) at your Local union office.

—Cheryl Kelso

## **The National Nurse Education Initiative (NNEI): Not What It Seems?**

Following are excerpts from a Title 38 email conversation that took place during the month of April, initiated by an officer at the Boise VA. Several VAs are represented here, though individual identities have been removed:

“We have 2 staff nurses that recently completed their Nurse Practitioner degrees, funded through the NNEI. Both were given tuition and fees based on the need for additional NPs. Now that they've completed their degrees and are applying for open positions here, they're being denied these positions and outsiders have been hired. They have remained in their staff nurse positions. One has asked for release from his pay-back obligation but was told that since he still has a job here management has met the letter of the law - even though this means no chance of earning the additional salaries that they would be earning as ARNPs, and the waste of taxpayer's money spent on their advanced education. One person was told that she was too familiar during her interview (even though she knows everyone well) and that they weren't sure of her intentions to remain with the VA (like they're sure of the outsider's intentions??). The first NP is also a disabled Desert Storm vet and should be given preference, as far as I'm concerned.

“This happened at our place as well as others but what I see most frequently is you have no experience as a NP so the nurse is forced to continue to work as a staff nurse to pay back her indebtedness to the VA, I tried to get language that stated if VA can't give them a position then they excuse the debt.

“In one of these cases, the NP that was hired from the outside was a brand new graduate, too - and had been in the same NP classes as our employee. I suspect the reason was related to competency and/or experience -which, of course, won't wash after hiring a different brand new grad. [Perhaps we should ] call the IG about the waste of taxpayer's money on this program?

“We had this issue at INDY VA. This medical center sent several RN's to APN's... But once they became APN's and attempted to obtain jobs within the medical center, they were turned down, due to "no experience". This medical center hired from outside, they want only APN's with experience.

“I just spoke to a soon to graduate ANP here in Portland who was told by the head of Primary care that she will not be hired into a NP position here at Portland in that department. No reason why that I am aware of but I believe it has to do with the fact that this person is a new grad.

“The NNEI handbook section #14, c., speaks to assigning the employee to the position for which they were educated under the NNEI scholarship.

“When we grieved and took a case (of a RN going to APN School, paid by the VA, and then the VA not selecting for any APN Position), we used the handbook. Yes, it does state, assigning the employee to the position, for which they were educated! During the arbitration (which we lost), management (HR and Nursing) stated,

1. The RN is still working as a RN, and an APN education is Nurse Education, the same as a RN who goes and gets a 2 year, or 4 year degree! They are still a RN, and as long as management has them working as a RN, they are fulfilling the handbook.

2. That a APN is still an RN and management believes that the nurse may have a APN education, but, again, a RN is a RN, so the VA is fulfilling the handbook, as the RN is working in the position they were educated for, a RN! Management does not have to work the new APN as a APN, just keep them in an RN position!

3. Management has the right to select who received an open position

4. Even though the new APN is not being given an APN position, the APN is still using his/her "new knowledge" and this is a great benefit to the patients, which the APN is assigned to!

Our local has been trying to get this changed for at least 3 years and . (HA, not doing well.) We lost the arbitration. Again, a RN is a RN, some just have more education, and it benefits the patients on the wards to have the APN Use his/her knowledge caring for the patient. (Just not getting the recognition or pay of APN) But, Our wonderful management will let Head Nurses, who obtain APN's, work 4 hours a week in a clinic as an APN! This is great for the Head Nurses! It moves them to an APN pay scale and they maintain APN skills. But our wonderful management will not do this for staff RN's who receive APN's! NO..... They will not let them work 4 hours a week in a clinic as an APN and be allowed to move to the higher paying APN scale and use APN skills! Our local has been working for at least 3 years to change this. Management rewards Unit Managers, who want to be a manager, but also work as an APN and receive higher pay! But no reward for staff RN's who receive APN and want to work as APN's and also move to the APN pay scale!

“This looks clearly like a breach of contract and should be addressed by the Under Secretary (or the court) along with a request for a waiver of obligation. It would be interesting to hear who the arbitrator was. Many people do not understand the role and requirements of an APN, including Nursing Management. Also, since the facility has already set the precedent, there's no reason why a nurse manager can't fill in when there's RN staffing shortages...An RN is an RN....

■

## ***AFGE Urges Congress to Pass Legislation to Protect Nurses and Patients***

Washington—National Nurses Week is celebrated annually in May to recognize the enormous efforts nurses make each day to save lives and maintain the health of millions. However, despite the hard work and dedication of America's nurses, overall patient care is being compromised because nurses are overworked and hospitals are severely understaffed. **"During National Nurses Week, we should do more than just thank nurses for their hard work," says AFGE National President John Gage. "We should do what we can to help them do their jobs more effectively and safely."**

**Recent studies have revealed a clear link between overworked nurses, staffing shortages, and patient care.** According to a University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing study, 20,000 people die each year because they checked into a hospital with overworked nurses. The study also found that Americans scheduled for routine surgeries run a 31 percent greater risk of dying if they are admitted to a hospital with a severe shortage of nurses. "The understaffing issues really hit home for the VA because **registered nurses** are being forced to care for too many patients at the same time," says Gage.

Legislation introduced by Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), the Nurse Staffing Standards for Patient Safety and Quality Care Act of 2005 (H.R. 1222), **will help patients receive safe, quality care by requiring hospitals to follow minimum nurse-to-patient staffing ratios.** The bill also would require that the Department of Health and Human Services establish staffing requirements for **licensed practical nurses.** To assure that nurses are free to speak out for their patients, the bill includes whistleblower protection. "Veterans and the nurses who care for them will benefit from passage of this important nurse staffing legislation because it applies to VA hospitals as well as Medicare reimbursed hospitals," says Gage. ■

*Get involved. Go to [www.afge.org](http://www.afge.org) or call your Local 3197 Union Office: x6-2737.*

*Barbara Phinney, RN, Local President*

*Barbara Tickner, LPN, Chief Professional Steward*

## **Contracting Out the Back Door: Food Service and Canteen (Part 1 of 2)**


—Gil Veyna

The integration of the canteen service with the kitchen became a hit issue of discussion at the May 11, 2005 union meeting. AFGE members were appalled to hear that their national leadership had agreed to the consolidation of the two services.

The agreement as signed would effectively erode the wage grade system in the kitchen. It would result in current and newly hired canteen workers doing the work of wage grade employees in the kitchen, but being paid substantially less.

This consolidation is yet another attempt at contracting out by VA management officials. AFGE nationally signed off on the agreement in hopes of preventing further cuts to an already thin workforce. But historically employers have used the threat of cuts as a ploy, claiming contracting is the lesser of two evils. It appears that our national leadership has been pressured into giving away gains that were won by earlier generations of federal workers.

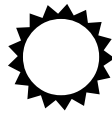
Part 2 will delve into the role that the activism of predominantly Black kitchen workers played, with the union, in raising the wages of kitchen staff in the late 1960s and 1970s. ■

*Note from the editor:* The VCS-NFS Integration Committee has been charged with improving food services while simultaneously reducing labor costs. As Wal-Mart has shown, this is a recipe for the exploitation of workers **and managers.** 

Announcing the  
Local  
**th Anniversary Picnic**

and Special Assistance Fund raiser

*Bringing Our Families Together  
to Celebrate    Years as a Local*



Sunday    July  
Noon – PM  
Genesee Park  
South Genesee St    Seattle

A small donation (    /adult    /family)  
will be requested for the Employee  
Special Assistance Fund

## AFGE LOCAL 3197

### OFFICERS

Barbara Phinney, RN, President

Gilbert Martinez, Vice President

Larry Fowler, Unit V.P.-VARO

Karimah Bailey, Treasurer

Roy Frye, Chief Steward

Barbara Tickner, LPN, Professional Chief  
Steward

Debra Kurran, Unit Chief Steward-  
VARO

**Local 3197 General Membership  
meets every 2nd Wednesday of the  
month, at 5:00 PM in Bldg 1-Room  
240, at VA Puget Sound Health  
Care System, 1660 S. Columbian  
Way, Seattle, WA 98108.**

## SHOUT

May-June 2005

### In this issue:

The VA Budget – Editorial  
Bianca Plank

Letter from the President  
Barbara Phinney

11th District Caucus Report  
Barbara Phinney

Law Enforcement Steering Cmte  
Johnny Walker

Contract Negotiations Update  
Alma Lee

Natl. Nurse Education Initiative  
Title 38 Email Group

Legislation to Protect Nurses  
AFGE

Contracting Out the Back Door  
Gil Veyna

Picnic Announcement!

AFGE LOCAL 3197  
1660 SOUTH COLUMBIAN WAY  
SEATTLE, WA 98108

Non Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage Paid  
Seattle, WA  
Permit No. 332

