Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Our union made great strides this past year in resolving many of the lingering issues we had with the Department of Energy (DOE) contractors and DOE career employees. It has not been easy, but with the leadership of our USW Atomic Energy Workers Council (AEWC) we persevered, documented our concerns and successfully explained the situations at our facilities to top DOE officials who had the power to take constructive action.

We cannot thank Dave Foster and Natasha Campbell enough for all their help these past several years to navigate the DOE maze and discover whether it was the DOE or the contractors making the decisions that negatively impacted our members. Before they arrived at DOE as senior advisors to DOE Secretary Dr. Ernest Moniz, we kept getting contradictory answers from the contractors and DOE career employees. It was so frustrating for me and the AEWC members.

Dave and Natasha also brought us together with the relevant parties to devise resolutions to our issues at the nuclear cleanup sites in Paducah, Ky., Piketon, Ohio, Idaho Falls, Idaho, Hanford, Wash., Oak Ridge, Tenn., and Carlsbad, N.M.

Devotion to Membership

Our AEWC representatives are devoted to their respective locals. They spend unlimited time in phone conference calls, contacting the contractors and DOE and meeting with them, and lobbying elected officials in Washington, D.C., to resolve the issues at their plants and ensure there is enough federal funding for cleanup operations so the contractors are not forced to lay off their members.

The AEWC knows more about DOE operations than do the contractors that are at the facilities for as long as their contract term with the DOE.

Nominated DOE Secretary

The AEWC and I worked hard these past few months tying up the unresolved matters we had with the DOE and contractors. We had our last meeting a week ago with Dave and Natasha to settle everything before they leave the department. We will miss them dearly.

We also will miss outgoing DOE Secretary Dr. Moniz, a former Professor of Physics and Engineering Systems at the prestigious and world-renowned Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The past four out of five heads of the DOE were world-renowned and/or Nobel Prize-winning scientists with a deep understanding of physics and nuclear weapons.

President-elect Trump nominated former Texas Governor - and “Dancing with the Stars” contestant— Rick Perry as DOE Secretary.

You may remember seeing him in the 2011 Republican primary when he said he wanted to eliminate three government agencies—the Department of Education, the Department of Commerce and he could not remember the name of the third agency he wanted to eliminate. That forgettable agency was the DOE, the agency he is now slated to lead.

While Perry may be familiar with the oil industry -- given its prevalence in Texas -- the nuclear industry may be a new challenge for him. There are some nuclear facilities in Texas -- the Pantex Plant near Amarillo, Texas, which maintains the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile, the two operating nuclear power plants in the state, and the nuclear waste disposal facility in rural West Texas.

We plan on working early with Governor Perry and his team to get them up-to-date on the issues faced across the DOE weapons complex sites. We will be relying on all of you to help us ensure that we are imparting all of the necessary information to DOE during this transition.

Holiday Greetings

Now is the time to rest, relax and spend time with your family and friends during the holidays. Let them know you love and care for them because it is not a given that we will be here each day.

My wish for you all is to have a wonderful Christmas and Hanukah filled with love, joy and blessings for what we have in our lives. I hope you and your family have a healthy and happy New Year!

International Vice President Carol Landry
Head of the USW atomic sector
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Matt Ridgway, an instrumentation technician, 10-year employee and Local 12-9477 member at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in Carlsbad, N.M., remembers well the February 2014 underground truck fire. A volunteer member and captain of the “red” mine rescue team at the permanent underground nuclear waste storage facility, he said the incident was his most dangerous mine rescue experience.

The situation was designated as an IDLH (immediately dangerous to life and health) atmosphere because of high gas and carbon monoxide levels, Ridgway said. His “red” team put out the fire. WIPP is a salt mine with rooms that contain barrels of radiological waste and transuranic waste from recycled spent fuel or plutonium used to fabricate nuclear weapons. The rooms are in sections and there are corridors to get to the sections of rooms.

A roof in one of the rooms fell unexpectedly in November and Ridgway’s “red” team went underground to assess the damage.

Why Seek Danger?
Most people would not put themselves in such danger, much less volunteer for it, but Ridgway describes it as “a different kind of mindset.”

“I once had an engineer on my team. His wife asked him, ‘Why would you run into a mine that’s on fire when people run out?’ Her husband responded, ‘Because I am a smart guy, and I think I could help.’

“You have to have a selfless attitude and want to do something for others and be part of something. Everyone who lasts in mine rescue has this drive to help people,” Ridgway said.

He has been a volunteer on WIPP’s mine rescue team since being employed at the facility.

Two Teams
WIPP has two volunteer mine rescue teams: a “red” team and a “blue” team. Each team has salaried, exempt and union personnel.

The WIPP mine rescue teams have responded to underground incidents a couple of times, he said. Since his employment at the facility there have not been any rescues of people, and he has never gotten injured performing mine rescue work.

Death of a Friend
Ridgway said he started doing mine rescue work in 1994 at one of the potash mines. The death of a friend in a mine collapse prompted him to get involved, along with having relatives active in mine rescue work.

“Years ago, when I was just a young guy, I had a friend in high school who was killed in a collapse in Wyoming. It was the Solvay mine in Green River, Wyo. Two people were killed and one was that friend of mine I went to school with,” he recalled.

“My cousin was in mine rescue. I had probably three cousins in mine rescue at the time.”

Must be Counted On
To be on the team a person has to have at least one year of underground experience and also be a WIPP employee for at least one year.

Ridgway said that being part of a mine rescue team “is a really big deal. You have to prove yourself. We will give you a chance, but we have to be able to count on you.

“It takes a commitment. You have to know your job and do it right. You start at the bottom and if you don’t do what you’re supposed to do, we will cut you loose. These guys will hold you accountable. The same thing goes for the blue team and any other mine rescue team in the country,” Ridgway said.

Monthly Training
The Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) requires eight hours of training a month using oxygen. Richard West, who works for emergency management, is a full-time trainer for the teams.

West creates a practice drill and “creates scenarios for us to work out. We have a national mine rescue rulebook that we use for training that is a MSHA publication,” Ridgway said. “I am a member of the national mine rescue rules committee.”

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Competitions are also a part of the training team members undergo. Eight people on each team are allowed to participate in competitions. The WIPP mine rescue teams compete with other teams across the country in local, national and international competitions.

**Competition Simulates Pressure**

“Competition is the best way MSHA can use to simulate pressure in a real mine rescue situation,” Ridgway said.

He said that part of the competition involves taking a test on MSHA’s training modules, and there are seven different modules a person needs to know such as mine exploration, rescue of survivors and putting out fires.

“When you sit down to take these tests, there is a lot of pressure. You don’t want to let your team down. We hold people accountable for that,” he said. “It shows dedication and determination to read the rulebook and retain the information.”

A field test is also part of the competition. An outline of an underground mine is set up or sometimes the test is set up inside a mine. Ridgway said it usually takes two hours to handle a simulated problem dealing with ventilation, fires, first aid, rescue of survivors and gas detection.

Within the “red” or “blue” team is a two-member technician team and a first aid team. One person on the technician team works on gas detectors and has 30 minutes to repair and calibrate two gas detectors—Ridgway performs this test—and another person has 30 minutes to discover what is wrong with the breathing apparatus, check for broken parts and see if anything is missing.

Ridgway said these two activities “get pretty competitive.”

The first aid team has three members who handle “victims.” They ensure the scene is safe, perform first aid and provide security for the victims. He said the setup looks realistic.

Ridgway is the vice president of the mine rescue association in the Carlsbad basin. The organization puts on a local contest and teams come in from around the U.S. MSHA judges it.

He said his “red” team usually travels to competitions in Rock Springs, Wyo., Maysville, Ky., Lake Finlay, N.Y., Carlsbad, N.M., and sites in Nevada. National competitions occur on even years.

In 2017, the “red” and “blue” teams will travel to two competitions. Usually the two teams travel to different contests. “We’re very competitive with the ‘blue’ team,” he said.

**Accolades**

In 2016, the “blue” team won the field contest in the national competition. In 2014, his “red” team won the overall national championship title and also placed second in first aid at one national contest. It also won first place in first aid, and the technician and field contests at the Carlsbad and Lake Finlay competitions.

WIPP sends the “red” and “blue” teams to the contests. “They support us 100 percent, and we are very grateful for that support,” Ridgway said.

Three of WIPP’s rescue team members are in the National Mine Rescue Team Hall of Fame. Ridgway’s cousin, Gary Kessler, was the captain of the “blue team” for 30 years and is there. Two others, Joe Baca and Buddy Webb, are in the hall of fame as well.

**“Gets Into Your Blood”**

Even though the mine rescue team is a volunteer experience, it gets “into the blood” for those who perform that work.

“One guy on my team left to work in the oil field, but he missed the mine rescue team so much that he came back to WIPP. It broke his heart not to compete,” Ridgway said.

Doing such dangerous mine rescue work also becomes rewarding because of the close ties developed between and among team members.

“Were a very close-knit team. We can count on each other. I trust them with my life and they trust me. I’m the captain and they follow me,” he said. “I have mine rescue friends across the country I’d do anything for; I’d give them the shirt off my back and I know they’d do the same for me.”

How long will Ridgway volunteer on the mine rescue team?

“We talk about that all the time,” he said. “My wife and kids are probably tired of it, but it is something I like to do.”