Atomic Workers Raise Concerns to Energy Department Officials

Members of the USW’s Atomic Energy Workers Council (AEWC) met with U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) officials at the group’s semi-annual meeting in Washington, D.C., on March 17-19, 2019. Council members discussed their sites’ working conditions and offered suggestions for improvement.

Anne White, assistant secretary of the DOE’s Office of Environmental Management, and Doug Matheney, special advisor to the DOE Secretary in the Office of Fossil Energy, met with the council on March 18 for two hours.

Hanford

Bill Collins, vice president at large/business agent for Local 12-369 at the Hanford nuclear reservation in Washington state, told DOE officials how the contractor for the Plutonium Finishing Plant (PFP) project is accelerating tear-down work, which has led to numerous technical mistakes and the hiring of many under-qualified personnel.

The PFP nuclear chemical operators had 20-30 years of experience handling plutonium and plutonium-contaminated systems. Yet, management moved them out and replaced them with Decontamination and Decommission (D&D) workers who had never worked with fissile material or plutonium-contaminated processes and equipment.

“When you review the safety metrics, you can see how conditions started to diminish up to the final, large-scale contamination incidents and the eventual shutdown of the D&D project in December 2017 when 42 workers were contaminated,” Collins said.

Demolition of the remaining lower-risk portions of the PFP main processing facility and vault restarted the week of April 8, 2019, and are expected to continue through June 2019.

Idaho National Laboratory

At Idaho National Laboratory (INL), the DOE is considering a re-bid of the Fluor Idaho, LLC clean-up contract in 2021, even though the clean-up work is slated for completion in 2025.

Local 12-652 at INL urged DOE officials not to re-bid the cleanup agreement because of the complications that occur during any contract transition. Local union officials also emphasized that the cleanup successes at the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Plant and Oak Ridge National Laboratory were possible because the DOE kept in place the main contractor for the remaining few years of the projects.

Waste Isolation Pilot Plant

Local 12-9477 at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) near Carlsbad, N.M., raised concerns (Continued on page 2)
about workers’ ability to breathe clean air in the underground transuranic waste disposal site. A new ventilation system is in its earliest stages of installation, but the local said that ventilation problems could be mitigated if DOE had more fans operating.

The atomic locals also called attention to labor-management concerns at their sites, including DOE’s delay in issuing bargaining parameters to contractors at several of the clean-up projects.

“This makes it difficult for the contractors and unions to negotiate timely agreements,” said Jim Key, AEWC president.

The council suggested that DOE make its bargaining parameters available to the union at the same time they are issued to the contractor.

The council also recommended that quarterly meetings be re-started among the USW, the DOE and major site contractors so potential disputes could be resolved. In addition, the council asked the officials to approach the contractors about allowing USW safety trainers, who operate under DOE-issued grants, to teach their work forces.

White said she would look into releasing the bargaining parameters to the union at the same time as the contractors receive them.

Matheney said he was willing to visit the DOE sites, meet with the locals and their members, and convey their concerns to senior contractor personnel.

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**Portsmouth Site Undergoes Changes**

The former Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant site in Piketon, Ohio, has over the last year weathered a wave of changes, including a possible new contractor, employee buyouts, an on-site waste disposal facility and the election of a former local union president.

The Department of Energy (DOE) has until April 24 to decide whether to exercise a 22-month option to keep Portsmouth Mission Alliance, LLC (PMA) as the infrastructure support contractor for the Piketon site.

PMA is a joint venture between North Wind and Swift and Staley. The company has a $140 million contract with DOE that began in March 2016 and will continue through mid-January 2021 if DOE approves the extension.

PMA’s scope of work includes surveillance, maintenance, and repair of facilities; telecommunications and computing; safeguards and security; records and property management, and grounds and road maintenance.

The USW represents 72 PMA employees and is in negotiations over economic issues in the contract.

**Employee Buyouts**

The site’s cleanup contractor, Fluor-BWXT Portsmouth LLC (FBP), extended an employee buyout plan originally offered last December. The Self-Select Voluntary Separation Program allowed up to 75 workers to voluntarily leave their jobs in exchange for a separation payment.

Now, another 29 employees can take advantage of the program. Those who decide to leave will work their last day for Fluor on May 30.

A Fluor spokesman told the media that significant clean-up progress had been made in deactivation work, prompting the focus to include demolition of buildings and remediation of the site. He said the separation program allows FBP to realign the existing
labor work force skill sets to upcoming demolition activities.

USW-represented workers perform the deactivation work, but the spokesman said FBP has no plans for involuntary layoffs. The building trades handle the demolition work.

John Knauff, Local 1-689 president, said the buyouts are a way for DOE and Fluor to reduce the USW work force without a layoff being declared, and to have others do the USW work. He said the union’s contract language on subcontracting is much stronger if the contractor calls for a layoff.

“In addition, we don’t have a sufficient number of employees to do all of the Decontamination and Decommission (D&D) work necessary to prevent radioactive and hazardous waste from going into the on-site waste disposal cell,” he said. “We need that D&D activity so the site can be reindustrialized.”

**On-Site Waste Disposal Cell**

Local 1-689 has joined the village of Piketon and other communities in opposing the DOE’s waste disposal cell under construction at the site’s Area D. The cell would handle “low-level” radioactive waste from the demolition of the buildings at the site, and be ready to accept this waste around fiscal year 2021. “Higher-level” waste would still be transported out west for disposal.

Piketon hired a third party to independently review the environmental studies completed and to verify the data that DOE used in its decision to construct the disposal cell in Area D. The assessment indicated that fractures in the bedrock could pose a threat to groundwater if the waste cell should leak.

Local 1-689 pointed to the third-party assessment in its resolution of opposition to the on-site disposal cell. The local is also concerned about the lack of criteria for what kind of transuranic waste (waste with man-made radioactive elements heavier than uranium) is put in the cell.

Knauff expressed this reservation in an Aug. 28, 2018, letter to DOE Secretary Rick Perry. He was concerned about the waste from the demolition of the X-326 process building being dumped in the disposal cell.

“There is a large amount of process equipment still in the building containing enriched uranium and other transuranic (normal for that building),” Knauff wrote to Perry. “There are also large quantities of other very hazardous materials such as PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyl) remaining in the building, all of which will go uncontrollably into the waste cell if not removed before the building is isolated.”

The local said in its resolution opposing the construction of the waste cell that it expects DOE to ship all waste generated by D&D activities to approved offsite disposal facilities.

**Local President’s Goals**

Knauff was elected local president last year, and since then he’s set an ambitious plan to move the local forward.

“I’m trying to find a way to protect the community going forward so they do not get stuck with a contaminated site. This community has performed a huge service to our national defense. It would be a shame to give them a 100-acre radiologically toxic waste site.”

The former Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant has been a part of Knauff’s life since he was a child. His dad worked at the former gaseous diffusion plant when it started up in 1954.

In 1969, he was approved for the site’s apprenticeship program, but put it on hold while he served in the military during the Vietnam War. He began his apprenticeship in December 1972 when he returned from the war.

His union activism started during a 1974 strike at the plant, and in 1976 he became a strike captain. After the dispute ended, he became a steward and then a Division 1 maintenance committeeman. He filled in for local union leaders when they needed assistance while he was raising a young son.

The membership elected Knauff local union president in 1989, and he held that position until he was appointed a staff representative in October 1995. He serviced locals in the South and the Midwest.

In 2011, Knauff retired from the International and returned to the Piketon plant. He said that when members requested he run for local union president last year, he decided to put his name in and won.
Atomic Health and Safety Activist Moves On

After years of involvement in USW’s nuclear sector, Herman Potter decided to re-focus his life on other priorities. Last December, he resigned as vice president of the USW’s Atomic Energy Workers Council (AEWC). Before that, he declined to run again for the Local 1-689 presidency at the Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion plant cleanup site in Piketon, Ohio.

“On behalf of the AEWC members, I want to thank Herman for his years of hard work, commitment and leadership to our members who work across the DOE complex,” said USW International Vice President Carol Landry.

Passion for Health & Safety

Potter's passion for health and safety and training guided his union activism. He emphasized that it is necessary to read and study legislation and nuclear policy issues, talk to people to understand what the DOE and contractors are doing, and then build a strategy for action.

He started at the Portsmouth facility in 1988 as a lab technician. Within a year, he went into operations and was a process operator for four years. In 1993, he ran for a safety representative position and won.

“I ran for the safety rep. position in order to change how the local union handled safety issues,” Potter said. “I wanted to bring a level of technology to the position and base decisions on existing standards and the systems in place. “I believe in Systems of Safety, and I believe workers have the ability to do anything they need to do.”

He left Portsmouth and worked for PACE from December 2000 until September 2007, starting out as a grant administrator for the medical surveillance program. Later, he became the administrator for PACE’s medical surveillance and DOE HAZWOPER programs, and investigated catastrophic incidents in the paper, oil, chemical, mining and metal stamping industries.

Tenure as President

Potter was Local 1-689 president from 2011 to 2018 during a time when the Portsmouth site transitioned from control by a private entity, the U.S. Enrichment Corp. (USEC), to the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE).

“My goal was to establish the local union as a political force, to have us be progressive in the area of health and safety, and to organize people as fast as we could,” he said.

During his tenure the local organized six groups of workers at the site, ranging from radiological control technicians (RCTs) to planners, buyers, industrial hygiene workers and escorts, who walk around the site with those who lack a security clearance. Membership grew more than 30 percent.

He also focused on health and safety training.

“I think there was no doubt our local was progressive in health and safety,” he said. “We had nine full-time safety reps. We were doing 70 percent of the health and safety training, we had 30 worker-trainers, and we were training people outside of our site.”

In the fall of 2017, the local partnered with the USW Tony Mazzocchi Center, the village of Piketon, the DOE Training Institute at Hanford and the Pike County Career Technical Center to offer RCT training to the site’s workers and the community. A shortage of RCTs prompted the training. Most of the RCT graduating class members found work at the Portsmouth site.

Remember Atomic Employees This Workers Memorial Day

Hundreds of thousands of workers in the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) nuclear complex gave their lives to keep this nation safe during the Cold War. They were exposed to radiation, plutonium, beryllium and numerous other toxic substances while engaging in the production of America’s nuclear weapons.

Today, thousands of workers are cleaning up this toxic legacy, and despite greater knowledge of the hazards these workers face, there still are instances of employees receiving contamination because of the contractors’ push to get performance-based incentive fees from DOE.

Workers Memorial Day is on April 28 and is commemorated both before and during the week of this event. It is not too late for atomic locals to plan an event to remember those killed and injured on the job and as a result of occupational illnesses.

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Here are some ideas for an event:

- Have a minute of silent meditation at your site.
- Hold a candlelight vigil.
- Read the names of members killed on the job or as a result of occupational illnesses at your next local union meeting.
- Plant a tree in remembrance of Workers Memorial Day.
- Talk to your local media about the importance of Workers Memorial Day and having a union contract because these agreements contain health and safety language and provisions for training.
- Work with site contractors to involve everyone in a week of “Finding the Hazards.” Then, set up a timetable to resolve the hazards found.
- Conduct a safety training using actual incidents as case studies and have everyone engage in small group discussions.
- Contact the USW Tony Mazzocchi Center about having a health and safety training done at your facility. Go to: https://www.uswtmc.org

The national AFL-CIO offers stickers, fact sheets and other Workers Memorial Day materials that can be ordered for a small fee. Here is the link to order material: https://aflcio.org/about-us/conferences-and-events/workers-memorial-day

Click to download a flyer to hang in your union hall or break room in English or Spanish. Go to https://www.usw.org/news/media-center/articles/2019/april/WMD_EngPoster_8x11.pdf

Attention Atomic Workers: If your local union does an event or health and safety training in commemoration of Workers Memorial Day, please take some photos so we can post them online and use them in the Nuclear Times newsletter. Send them to Lynne Hancock, USW Communications Department, at lhancock@usw.org.