 Atomic Energy Workers Council Sees Progress in Work with DOE

Members of the USW’s Atomic Energy Workers Council (AEWC) in September gathered in Hanford, Wash., for their fall meeting. The group addressed problems with contractors and discussed ways to improve communication with the Department of Energy (DOE).

The AEWC has been chipping away at these longstanding issues at its meetings for the past six years. Now, with the help of two new DOE labor liaisons, it is finally seeing progress.

New help at the DOE

Resolving problems with the DOE has traditionally been difficult for the AEWC. Appointed DOE officials and contractors awarded DOE projects come and go, while career DOE employees are left to interpret labor agreements as they deem appropriate.

Since the AEWC meeting last May, however, two new labor liaisons, Dave Foster and Natasha Campbell, are providing much-needed help in navigating the DOE bureaucracy.

Foster, formerly a USW District Director and the executive director of the Blue-Green Alliance, and Campbell both participate in regular conference calls with USW staff. They also have met with the union numerous times to help facilitate movement on some of the AEWC’s longstanding concerns.

“Dave and Natasha have been able to expose the barriers and challenges we have faced,” said International Vice President Carol Landry, who heads the union’s atomic sector. “Things still take a long time to resolve, but we have accomplished more with their help.”

For example, Foster and Campbell presented a solution to the longstanding pension and retiree health benefit issues when workers at the former Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion plant transitioned their employment to Fluor-B&W Portsmouth.

The new liaisons were also able to help when workers from the former Paducah Gaseous Diffusion plant transitioned their employment from the U.S. Enrichment Corp. (USEC) to Fluor.

The USW now has a tentative agreement with DOE and the contractors regarding these benefit issues.

Missing contract language

However, despite Foster and Campbell’s work with the AEWC, progress in some areas remains slow, and challenges remain.

When the DOE puts out Requests for Proposals (RFP) and Requests for Task Proposals (which are for fixed price contracts) for public comment, for example, these requests are supposed to contain union recognition and transition language.

Since 2009, this language has been harder to navigate and easier for the contractors to abuse, and the International and AEWC have had to pressure DOE for inclusion of this mandatory language when it has not appeared in the requests prior to public comment.

Two of DOE’s latest draft requests missed this work force protection language, and the USW was forced to contact Foster, who managed to get the needed labor section in the final versions of the DOE contracts out for bid.

At Paducah, Fluor was not hiring workers in accordance with their seniority, and it took Foster’s and Campbell’s direct intervention to ensure the contractor was hiring workers in the proper order.

Lack of bargaining parameters

The atomic locals also continue to get the runaround when they try to negotiate new contracts for existing workers and newly-organized groups. The contractors tell the union they have not received the bargaining parameters (what should be in the contract) from the DOE, and DOE officials say they sent the approved parameters to the contractors.

For several years, DOE officials claimed they did not determine contracts, even though they indirectly determined a labor agreement by what they were willing to reimburse contractors for handling the project.
“DOE should not announce an award with a contractor until they have the bargaining parameters,” said AEWC President Jim Key, who is the Local 550 vice president at large at the Paducah site.

“Last October, DOE awarded Fluor the contract, and a year later Fluor still does not have the bargaining parameters. It is a waste of DOE time and our time when DOE puts out a draft RFP and leaves out the bargaining parameters,” Key added.

This is a major area of concern that the USW, Foster and Campbell are working to correct.

Council Takes up Computer-Based Health and Safety Training

David Cassady, a representative from the USW Safety, Health and Environment Department and a part of the International’s Tony Mazzocchi Center (TMC) spoke to the AEWC this fall about the TMC’s health and safety training programs.

At the council meeting he discussed the training available from the TMC and particularly the problems with computer-based training.

“We need better evaluations on training. Some people are disciplined for not learning from the computer training at Hanford.

“The DOE and contractors are unwilling to identify computer training as a system issue. Plenty of OSHA studies show computer-based training doesn’t work,” he said.

Another problem is the contractors choosing computer-based training over the hands-on training provided by the union.

“We had a contractor who chose computer-based training, and the DOE charged for that. That is ridiculous for the contractor to not listen to what the union can provide for our work force,” AEWC President Jim Key said.

The TMC receives federal grant money for its training programs and this money is provided by taxpayers. It does not cost the contractors any money to have this training for their workers.

“That is almost fraud and abuse by the contractor when we make them aware of DOE training and they choose computer-based training and charge DOE for that,” Key said.

DOE representative Dave Foster agreed with the council about computer-based training.

“The idea is to do away with as much as possible the contractor safety training which is wasteful and ineffective because it is computer-based and is not hands-on training and does not involve the unions,” Foster said. “This issue got elevated and it will get more attention over the next year.”

AEWC Annual Site Tour Builds Sector Solidarity

One of the most important aspects of the AEWC is to provide networking opportunities between atomic sector workers from around the country. Each year, the council convenes at a USW-represented nuclear site to meet with the local leadership and tour their facilities to help improve understanding of the work other USW members do.

This fall, the AEWC toured the Hanford, Wash., Nuclear Reservation.

Vice President Carol Landry, District 12 Director Bob LaVenture, Local 12-369, which represents a majority of the Hanford workers, and AEWC members met this fall in Richland, Wash., at the local’s newly-renovated union hall.

Local 12-369 member Brian Ivey led a bus tour of Hanford’s building clean-up sites. These included tank farms, leaking one-and-two shell underground tanks that are being emptied into new, more protective tanks, a vitrification plant being built to treat the nuclear waste for disposal and the VOlpentest HAMMER Training and Education Center.

Hanford, located in south-central Washington along the Columbia River, is currently the most contaminated nuclear site in the U.S. and has the nation’s largest environmental clean-up. During the Cold War, the site produced plutonium for the country’s nuclear weapons program and this created a huge volume of nuclear waste. The most dangerous wastes are stored in 177 giant underground tanks.

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Funding Continued for Clean-up in Piketon

The International, Local 1-689 President Herman Potter and the local’s members successfully lobbied, along with the Piketon, Ohio, community, for the DOE’s continued funding of deactivation and decommissioning (D&D) work at the Portsmouth site.

They successfully got language in the Continuing Resolution to fund the federal government until Dec. 11. Senator Sherrod Brown (D), Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur (D-9th Dist.) and other members of the Ohio delegation helped the Portsmouth workers and Piketon community obtain funding for continuation of the D&D work.

The International, Local 1-689 and the Piketon community are now currently lobbying for continued funding for the federal government’s 2016 fiscal year.

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