



LOCAL 2369 GAZETTE

Vol. I No. 3



Photo credit—Marleen Cohen

Does the scaffolding on the Capitol dome mean that the government is broken?

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“Although our efforts were important on Lobby Day, we need all our members to be active and take action.”

- Local President Digeronimo

What Will the Election Year Bring?

Now that 2016 has come and 2015 has gone, it is a time to reflect on the past and look forward to the future. We must reflect on how we survived the morass of rubbish heaped upon Federal employees by Congress. For example, we barely survived the threat of another shutdown. In retrospect, I realized that I had a *ho-hum* attitude about it; a *what-else-is-new* feeling about the situation. This is a presidential election year. It seems that the candidates have been campaigning for the last two years. Remember, what happens in November will affect us all. Do NOT be one of those who say that it doesn't matter who wins. Guess what? **IT DOES MATTER!**

It is time to get involved. It is time to educate yourselves on the issues and the candidates. Both Presidential and Congressional races are important; grassroots participation is a key to initiating change. Learn where aspiring politicians stand on issues that affect your job; in particular your salary and working conditions. Talk to family and friends. Engage co-workers but only on breaks and lunches; not on work time. Remember, you can't endorse a specific candidate, at any time, while on Federal property. Participate in the political process. Contact your representatives.

Welcome to our new format. We hope you like it!

-The editor



Letter from the President

“What do we want?...5.3! ...When do we want it?...NOW!...If we don’t get it?...VOTE THEM OUT!!!” This was the message that was delivered to members of Congress during the AFGE Legislative Conference. Ten representatives of AFGE Local 2369 traveled to Washington DC and put mileage on their walking shoes and contributed to delivering this message to eleven out of our fourteen New Jersey Congressional members. Our Local has a longstanding commitment to legislative action. We recognize the importance of building a bipartisan coalition with our elected officials; we recognize the importance of educating them about the work we do and the service we provide to the American people. We did just that on February 9, 2016.

During our meetings with members of Congress, we expressed our position regarding the stagnation of our pay. We made it clear that a 5.3% pay raise is needed in order to bring us up to parity with the private, state and local government sectors. Federal employees have already paid a disproportionate price for the state of our economy; it is time that Congress recognizes our value and the need for Federal employees to be appropriately compensated for our dedication, hard work and service to the American public. A promise was made by Congress to Federal employees over 5 years ago regarding pay equity. It is time to keep that promise!

Additionally, we discussed the pitfalls of Vision 2025 and the need to keep offices open in order to effectively serve the public. We urged for full funding as well as putting SSA on a separate budget in order to ensure continued high quality service. We expressed our support for eliminating the Social Security wage base. We also discussed our concerns and advocated for our employees who are Veterans.

Our message was very well received by the New Jersey Congressional members from both sides of the aisle. We received commitments from our elected officials to assist us with some of the issues we brought to their attention and more importantly, we established and maintained relationships with our elected officials.

Although our efforts were important on Lobby Day, we need all our members to be active and take action. Call your members of Congress and express to them your opinion on the issues that affect Federal workers and the public that we serve. It is important that our elected officials not only hear from the leadership of the Local but also from YOU, a Union member and a member of the voting public!

I want to thank the individuals who took the time to join EVP Joseph Cooke and me for Lobby Day. The day began very early in the morning (the first bus pick up was at 6:00am) and they were dropped off at the end of the day at 9:00pm. There was a lot of walking and meetings in between those hours. Thank you, Deana Hosie, Warren Cohen, Marleen Cohen, Danny Osario, Lazaro Barreto, Martin Carr, Abe Caceres and Janet Santiago. Without all of you we would not have had nearly as successful a Lobby Day. I also want to thank our Legislative Director, Joanne Kriston for her great work in setting up our appointments on the Hill. I look forward to many more successful legislative endeavors. If you are interested in becoming active in legislative action, please contact me. It is my goal to continue to build an effective Local with legislative action being among our areas of strength.

Respectfully,

Angela Digeronimo
President
AFGE Local 2369



The AFGE Young Organizing Unionists for the Next Generation (Y.O.U.N.G.) program seeks to mobilize young union members to become leaders and activists for social change within AFGE and the Labor Movement. AFGE members who are under the age of 40 and those mentors that are over 40 will work together to include younger workers into the union structure and keep them engaged in what's at stake for working class Americans.

AFGE Y.O.U.N.G. intends to provide young members with networking opportunities and resources to engage in mobilizing other young workers into AFGE, union training to promote leadership skills, innovative social gatherings, AFGE conference meetings, and other engaging events. In doing so, AFGE Y.O.U.N.G. participants work to build lasting labor solidarity, advance issues of social and economic justice, and find more inclusive ways to engage the current and future generations in the Labor Movement.

Local 2369 is committed to the Y.O.U.N.G. program. Jason Ayala is currently serving as AFGE Local 2369 Y.O.U.N.G. Coordinator.



Spotlight on New Jersey

Hackensack TSC (formally Saddle Brook TSC)

Following up on *"When Is An Emergency Not An Emergency?"* reported in the previous issue of the Local 2369 Gazette, the Union and the Agency were able to reach a mutually beneficial agreement which relieved the situation for the employees of the Hackensack TSC. Kudos to the Union and SSA management for engaging in open communication as a tool for dispute resolution!

Mt. Holly

The Mt. Holly District Office will be relocating to Mt. Laurel. Recently, Union and Agency representatives negotiated the floor plan for the new location. The Union's rights in this area are limited to negotiation of the floor plan and a Memorandum of Understanding regarding the move and the new space.

The new office space will be a vast improvement over the deteriorating facilities in the current Mt. Holly space.

However, many questions arise as a result of this move. Why is the Mt. Holly District Office being relocated in such close proximity to the Cherry Hill District Office? The two office locations are 6 miles and approximately 15 minutes away from each other.

How will the offices being so close affect the number of claimants that visit each location? It is the Union's opinion that the numerics may change drastically. This may adversely affect one or both of the offices; affecting workloads and/or service to the public.

Will the fact that the District Office is located in a very congested area, a busy intersection and heavily traveled Route 70, have an effect on employees and visitors alike? It is obvious, after the Union visited the new site, that traffic problems will exist; especially at the beginning and end of the day.

Will there be enough parking available for employees and the public? There is some question concerning parking. Initially, there doesn't seem to be an issue; however, when other tenants subsequently move into available space in the same building there may be an issue.

Local 2369 will seek answers to all of the above questions in the coming months. We will be seeking further information regarding the process of relocation. Who is GSA accountable to when they are making relocation decisions? Does GSA conduct valid studies regarding the impact on employees and members of the public? Why is the Union not permitted to be involved earlier in the process? It is the Local's intention to continue discussions with SSA management and to bring our concerns to Congressman MacArthur. We will keep our membership posted on developments. Stay tuned!!!

Did You Know?

The Agency has implemented a new harassment complaint procedure separate from the usual EEO process.

An employee can avail themselves of this procedure in addition to filing an EEO complaint. There is a cadre in the New York Region that will investigate the complaint. The process was implemented to resolve harassment issues in a more expeditious manner. However, it is the Union's opinion that although in theory this is a good idea; in actuality it is flawed.

Employees are being intimidated in the process; complaints are not being referred for investigation; employees are being denied Union representation at the initial intake of the complaint. A prime example is a complaint that is now pending in the East Brunswick TSC. The employees have courageously stepped forward and have requested assistance regarding their work conditions; however, to date the complaint is not moving forward. More on this new procedure in future editions of the Local 2369 Gazette.



Photo credit - Marleen Cohen

Members of Local 2369 meet with AFGE 2nd District National Vice President Vincent Castellano in Washington DC on February 9, 2016.



Photo credit—Vincent Sarubbi

Members of Local 2369 with Congressman Donald Norcross (D NJ 1st District) at his Congressional office on February 9, 2016.



Photo credit—Marleen Cohen

Congressman Frank LoBiondo (R. NJ 2nd District) with members of Local 2369 .



Photo credit—Marleen Cohen

AFGE National President J. David Cox speaking to members of the AFGE 2nd District.

Ask Angela



Dear Angela,

Please explain to us how the leave roster is supposed to work? It seems that in different offices, the managers do it differently. Thank you.

During the months of February and August, employees submit requests for annual leave and/or religious compensation time of one calendar week or more and requests of days immediately preceding and following Federal holidays for the six month periods April through September and October through March, respectively. Roster requests must be submitted by the last day of February and August. Only requests of one week or more or days before or after a Federal holiday are considered roster requests.

Management determines the maximum amount of employees that can be approved annual leave. However, management must adhere to the Contract and is required to make every reasonable effort to allow the maximum number of employees to use leave (Article 31 Section 2B). Religious compensation time requires a slightly different analysis and the Agency must adhere to statutory requirements.

If conflicts arise, employees will first be given the opportunity to resolve the conflicts informally and given the opportunity to withdraw their request. If the conflict is not resolved informally, then the roster process is used to resolve the conflict.

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Coming events:

April 11, 2016: Town Hall Meeting for Onsite representatives and alternates.

May 2, 2016 - May 13, 2016: Union office visits (short term disability benefits open period)

Summer 2016: Family fun day. Details to follow.



March Madness Recruiting Drive

Get in a Zone...

Increase Local 2369 membership

**Local President
challenges AFGE Local
2369 to increase its
membership 25%
by Tax Day 2016.**

Put on a full court press and

SCORE!!

**Any member who recruits a
new member will be put in a
drawing to win a pair of Bose
wireless headphones.**

**Contact LP Digeronimo
by email at
Adigeronimo18@cs.com
for more information.**

Who is Really Stealing From You

In New Jersey, there is a bumper sticker that is popular and it reads“Thou shalt not steal.....the Government hates competition”. Frequently, these stickers can be found on pick-up trucks parked at Home Depot or Wal-Mart. If you notice one of these bumper stickers, it should cause some consternation because it refers to **YOU!**

The Government does not consist only of politicians who are motivated by poll numbers and election results. Neither is the Government some faceless abstraction. The Government is us, the civil servants. We are the career employees who are trying to make complex programs work without the necessary resources.

Often working conditions are far below private industry standards, with management who are primarily concerned with statistics. However, you already know this! The bumper sticker accuses us of being dishonest and stealing; but what are we stealing, and from whom?

The implication is that the American tax payer is being ripped off by Government employees. This of course just isn't so! The actual costs to administer Social Security is quite modest, below two percent. A big reason for that is the Government, unlike private industry, does not have any fat cat CEOs at the top getting eight figure compensation. Remember, that 10 million dollars gets you at least 125 grade 11 claims representatives. Likewise, when we do receive awards they amount to no more than a weekly salary; not exactly highway robbery.

One last point concerning competition. The fact is that more and more Government functions and services are being contracted out. The Department of Defense has been doing this for decades. Free enterprise in that area has produced delays, cost overruns and poor quality. The Bradley Fighting Vehicle is a perfect example.

Please don't engage in road rage if you spot one of those bumper stickers, but it is okay to feel offended. If the opportunity presents itself, you may wish to politely educate the driver about who is really stealing from them. It's not Government employees!

-William Reiche

Let It Snow.....At Your Own Peril

We were lucky this year to only experience one major snow storm and a couple of icy morning commutes. However, once again employees were subjected to less than wise decisions made by SSA management concerning delayed openings and excused absences. For employees who have experienced many storms while working for SSA this comes as no surprise.

Does SSA ever get it right on severe weather days?

Very seldom!

For the record, it is the Union's opinion that not having a delayed opening throughout the State of New Jersey on the Monday after the large winter storm this year was an egregious decision by SSA management!!! Employees, management officials and members of the public were forced to deal with dangerous road conditions. Employees either braved the elements or used their own hard earned leave.

How does it work?

Early in the morning, District Managers are requested to contact the Area Director and apprise him of road conditions in their particular district. The data is evaluated on an office by office basis; as well as on the conditions that exist in particular regions of the State. A decision is made based on what is being reported or not reported to the Area Director.

How should it work? Where does it fall apart?

District Managers take into consideration road conditions in their area. However, it appears that they only take into consideration conditions of the main roads in the area. Secondary roads, back roads, housing developments, district office parking lots etc. seem to not be taken into consideration. It also appears that managers prefer to err on the side of opening at the regular time rather than a delayed opening or closing an office.

The Union has requested that SSA management do their due diligence when it comes to opening offices on bad weather days. If they err, it should be on the side of safety for all.

What options do employees have when faced with bad weather?

Per the Contract, up to two hours of administrative leave may be granted to those employees arriving after the beginning of core hours or scheduled start time. However, the granting of administrative leave is contingent upon the manager determining that the employee made reasonable efforts to arrive timely and was delayed by the emergency conditions. In extreme situations, management may grant employees up to eight hours of administrative leave. The Union will continue to advocate for the bargaining unit employees' Contractual rights! It is our position that safety must come first when making decisions regarding delayed openings and closing of offices in emergency conditions. To be continued.....next winter!

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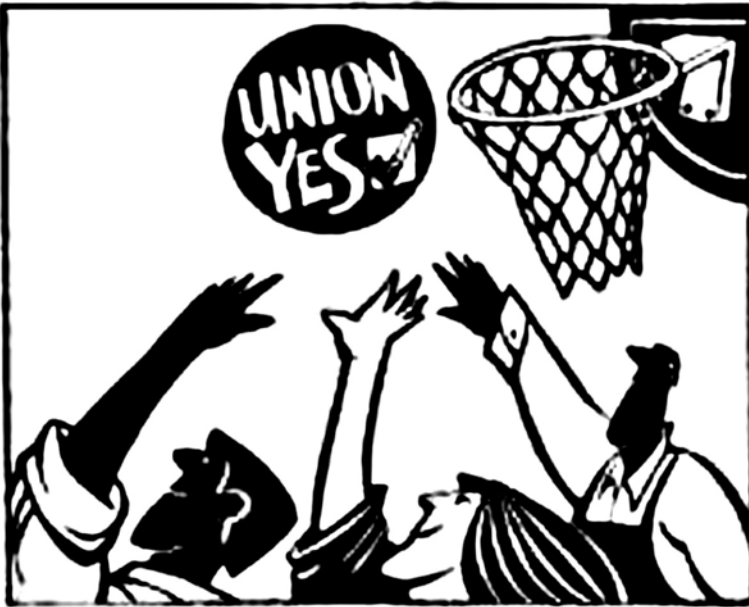
Employees involved in the conflict will be asked if they want to exercise their option or decline. If an employee exercises their option and based on their position on the roster are approved their leave request, they will move to the bottom of the roster.

If an employee does not exercise their option, the employee will be denied their leave request. If an employee exercises their option and is not approved leave based on their position on the roster, they will not move down on the roster.

If an employee has a leave request with multiple conflict days, the request will be approved or denied based on the first conflict day. Leave requests will not be given a split decision. In other words, if an employee requests two weeks of leave and there are two days in that request that are conflict days, the request will be approved or denied based on the option election and the roster run from the first conflict day. The entire request will either be approved or denied.

When employees are asked whether they want to exercise their option or decline, management needs to show the employee the current roster. After each conflict resolution, the roster needs to be updated and the new roster needs to be shown to the employees involved in the next conflict. Each conflict needs to be resolved in date order. Management has ten working days to give employees a decision on their six month annual leave requests.

Any employee who believes that they were disadvantaged or has any concerns regarding the roster process should speak to their onsite representative or to a member of the Local's Executive Board.



Contact Us

If you have any questions about the Local 2369 Gazette, or if you want to contribute something to the Local 2369 Gazette, please contact either Warren Cohen or Angela Digeronimo at the following email address:

Local2369gazette@gmail.com

**Please DO NOT use
Agency email.**

Money is Speech!

Corporations are people! As absurd as such statements may sound to most folks, just ask conservative members of our Supreme Court. Decisions rendered, especially “Citizens United”, opening the floodgates allowing money to flow unabated into political campaigns was for the most part based on these very notions.

Indeed, it is what it is. That is in fact the world we live in!

Thus, ordinary middle class citizens cannot compete with multi-millionaires and billionaires when it comes to persuading politicians. It’s “Pay to Play” in Washington! The speech of the vast majority become whispers, drowned out by the real players, including corporations, with duffle bags full of money to spare.

What to do!?!

Aha!!! Federal employees have the option to pool their money by paying Union dues. Much of this money goes to our National organization that lobbies for all of us; protects our employee rights, our salaries, our benefits, our working conditions.

Another choice open to Federal employees is to separately contribute to the AFGE Political Action Committee. These funds allow Federal employees to compete with billionaires and corporations by donating substantial sums of money to grateful politicians who in turn will tend to “see things our way”.

As unsavory as this may sound, if we do not compete with the “Big Boys”, we are toast!

If your fellow employee is not a Union member, not paying dues, he or she is not helping the rest of us, including him or herself. Talk to that person. Persuade him or her to sign up, become a proud Union member; become part of AFGE!

Let him or her know our Union successfully lobbied for time and one half overtime, credit hours, and a long list of other benefits that we should not take for granted. His or her dues will help our Union preserve and enhance our rights, our compensation, our benefits; our dignity. There is no free lunch!

-Lawrence Uniglicht