



**American Federation of
Government Employees (AFGE)
Local 704** (AFL-CIO)

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Strategic Overview and Goals

**AMERICAN FEDERATION OF
GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES (AFGE)**

LOCAL 704

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Introduction

During 2004 and 2005, several leaders and representatives of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) Local 704 met in facilitated strategic planning workshops to develop a strategic plan for the Local. Participants in the workshop addressed questions in the following areas: (1) creating a Union mission statement; (2) identifying Union stakeholders; (3) describing the bargaining unit; (4) defining the labor-management environment; (5) identifying the strength and weaknesses of the bargaining unit; and (6) clarifying bargaining unit opportunities, threats, and goals. A number of activities needed to implement the Union's most pressing goals were also identified.

The summary below captures some of the comments from those workshops, which I have edited into a short overview of our focus, concerns, and goals for improvements in the workplace. Please remember that this is meant to be a "work in progress." It is being posted now as the new Executive Board begins its two year term in order to stimulate a dialogue between the membership, officers and representatives of the Local. This Local will face new pressures in the coming years which threaten to undo many years of hard won gains for our members, and perhaps which even threaten our very existence as a viable Union. Therefore, I am asking each member of the Union to think about what we are trying to do on your behalf and then to volunteer to work with us to improve and protect the quality of your workplace.

A note for those who have not yet decided to join us as a member of AFGE Local 704: Your comments are always welcome, but I must advise you that preference is given to the concerns, ideas and thoughts of the over 380 bargaining unit employees who are members.

Part I

Mission Statement

The members of AFGE Local 704 are dedicated environmentalists who are committed to the protection of human health and the environment. AFGE Local 704 is their exclusive representative in labor negotiations and their advocate for the improvement and protection of employee rights in the workplace. The Union's objective is to obtain workplace changes through negotiated agreements which provide our members with a supportive work environment and

improved opportunities to work more effectively for the protection of human health and the environment. Our mission is to constantly improve our workplace conditions so that every bargaining unit employee has the opportunity, support and tools needed to accomplish the Agency's mission and advance in their chosen field and respective careers.

Description of the Union

AFGE Local 704 is a Union of highly dedicated employees working within the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA), Region 5 located in Chicago. AFGE Local 704 has the exclusive right to represent and negotiate on behalf of all bargaining unit employees in matters of collective bargaining. Many of our members are well versed in environmental engineering and science, as well as Federal environmental policies and regulations. Many function as technical experts in specialized fields which enable them to develop superior knowledge about specific environmental programs (Air, Superfund, Waste, Water, etc.) and enforcement practices. Our members are first and foremost, committed to protecting the country's human health and environment.

Union Stakeholders

AFGE Local 704 is a Union with the exclusive legal responsibility to represent the employment interests of the U.S. EPA Region 5 bargaining unit employees, and a professional duty to support the nation's environmental laws and the Agency's environmental mission. AFGE Local 704 recognizes that our combined efforts as a Union will have a significant impact on our members, on our relations with management, on the quality of our workplace, and on the success of workforce in meeting their environmental mission.

Labor-Management Relations Environment

AFGE Local 704 bargaining unit employees place a high degree of importance on their professional integrity and credibility. They expect the same focus on professional integrity and credibility from their U.S. EPA managers. Union and bargaining unit employees do not automatically presume a state of conflict with management. In most cases both bargaining unit employees and management share in the benefits which result from negotiated agreements. Worker involvement, honesty, and a professional work ethic are necessary to create an

environment in which productive labor-management relations may occur. AFGE Local 704's representatives strive to meet their professional obligations while following the Federal rules governing the collective bargaining process. They are willing to negotiate in good faith with management on issues which will lead to improved working conditions and more effective environmental work. They recognize that a vigilant workforce which understands labor law and the collective bargaining agreements will be required to use grievances, requests for information, Unfair Labor Practices (ULPs) and other legal tools to ensure that management acts fairly and in accordance with negotiated agreements.

Strength of the Bargaining Unit

AFGE Local 704 has many diverse points of strength which well serve its members' interest. Principal among them is the commitment of the dues-paying Union members to the field of environmental protection. As committed environmentalists, our members are well informed about Federal policies and are committed to the cause of a clean and safe environment.

AFGE Local 704 members are also fortunate to have a core group of skilled representatives to administer the Union's business and to enforce its members' contractual rights under the Master Collective Bargaining Agreement (MCBA), the Final AFGE National Collective Bargaining Agreement for Flexiplace (November 25, 1998), the U.S. EPA's National Reasonable Accommodations Procedures (NRAP) for AFGE Bargaining Unit Employees (November 2003), as well as legal rights under the Federal Service Labor Management Relations Statute (5 U.S.C. Chapter 71). These experienced volunteers work actively with bargaining unit employees to review grievances, negotiate changes in workplace conditions, and work with management to ensure a workplace environment which recognizes and fosters excellence.

Bargaining Unit Limitations and Needs

AFGE Local 704, like other Federal sector unions, is limited by Federal labor law as to what it can bargain over, and to the forms of self-help it is allowed to exercise. The Union depends on an informed membership which understands the laws and agreements which guide the actions and interactions bargaining unit employees and management. Above all, the Union depends on dedicated volunteer members who serve as negotiators, Officers, representatives, and stewards ...

members who develop the expertise to defend employees and to negotiate workplace changes on behalf of the membership.

However, the Union's greatest concern and weakness is the lack of active volunteers. As is typical in many Unions, only a small percentage of the active members volunteer their time to support the Local. Dues paying members may feel that their monthly dues have purchased them an entitlement to the services of our active Union volunteers. Many members seem to forget that every active member in the Local, whether officer or steward or negotiator, is a volunteer who made a personal decision to assume the responsibility of working actively on behalf of the shared interests of the Local.

Low membership involvement results in a number of related problems:

1. First, it places a disproportionate burden upon the Officers, representatives and stewards who are dedicating their time to protecting and promoting the professional dignity of each member. We can only keep dedicated volunteers if they can share the load with others. We can only progress if our members assume the personal responsibility for making the process work.
2. Secondly, all Union members, except for the President of the Local, must still perform all of their regular work. Most Union work, such as representing bargaining unit employees in contractual and professional matters, may only be done on "official time." This situation limits the amount of time which even the most active Union volunteer can spend on Union activities.
3. Finally, being limited to a relatively small group of active volunteers can result in uneven performance, as well as frustration and eventually "burn-out" among the Union Officers, representatives and stewards. While most of our Officers, representatives and stewards are already skilled and well prepared for their assignments, most new volunteers initially lack the training and background knowledge needed to serve as effective representatives of the Local. It takes time, training, and above all dedication to build up the skills needed to protect and foster the interests of the Local.

Bargaining Unit Opportunities and Threats

Over the next few years AFGE Local 704 will be presented with a number of institutional opportunities to strengthen its representational capabilities. The Local will also be confronted by multiple threats, including changes in Federal policy and perhaps even law (e.g., the “Working for America” Act) , which may undermine existing Federal workplace protections, along with increasing numbers of “consolidations” and “outsourcings” of Federal jobs to the private sector.

While increased worker anxiety caused by changing personnel relations policies serves to heighten the need and value of Union representation, it also represents a very real and dangerous threat to the continued integrity of the bargaining unit. Efforts to de-unionize the Federal sector with Departments of Defense and Homeland Security type provisions, institution of pay banding, outsourcing Federal jobs, and unilaterally reorganizing agency duties can seriously damage the collective standing of Federal civilian employees.

The bargaining and negotiating process is the Union’s primary mechanism for promoting fundamental changes in workplace conditions. Negotiations often result in long term changes which affect all members of the bargaining unit, and sound agreements improve conditions for all members of the bargaining unit.

ULP complaints and grievances under the MCBA are the Union’s primary mechanism for redress when management fails to recognize the requirements of the Federal Service Labor-Management Relations Statute or the collective bargaining agreements. When ULPs are necessary, they are an effective and essential legal tool for ensuring that labor-management relations follow the law which protects the exclusive right of the AFGE Local 704 to represent bargaining unit employees.

Goals of the Bargaining Unit

AFGE Local 704 proposes a number of goals for the bargaining unit. These are the primary objectives upon which the bargaining unit is committed to addressing.

1. First, the Local must continue to increase Union membership by attracting a broad cross-section of bargaining unit employees.

2. Second, the local must increase the number of Union members who participate and volunteer in Union activity.
3. Third, the Local must improve the capacity of the Union to hold management accountable for their actions toward workers and stakeholders.
4. Fourth, the Local must improve the Executive Board's understanding of the concerns of bargaining unit employees through increased and more effective communication and interaction.
5. Fifth, the Local must provide current and potential members of the Union with information about their rights and responsibilities under the collective bargaining agreements between AFGE Local 704 and the Agency.
6. Sixth, the Local must address the serious problem of outsourcing and privatization of Agency work.
7. Seventh, the Local must promote a workplace environment which protects the interests of the bargaining unit employees, and which fosters the personal excellence of each employee as they work to accomplish their environmental mission.