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Jack Anderson: **Union wants EPA to live up to name**

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The Frederick Post (Maryland)
July 26, 1991

Union wants EPA to live up to name

By JACK ANDERSON

WASHINGTON -- For nearly 11 years, occupants of the White House have, in not so many words, told the Environmental Protection Agency not to do its job too well. That anti-environment bias has decimated the ranks of concerned scientists in the EPA. Those who are left find themselves pitted against their own bosses in a fight to force the agency to live up to its name and protect the environment.

Now the EPA management is leaning on one of the last strongholds of protest -- the vocal union representing white-collar EPA workers. Management is trying to curtail the amount of work time that union members can spend on union business and has ordered the union leaders not to use agency time to talk to Congress, the public or the press.

The EPA Union, Local 2050 of the National Federation of Federal Employees, made a name for itself in 1988 when it protested an environmental hazard close to home -- the air quality in the EPA headquarters building in Washington. Perhaps as many as 20 percent of the 5,500 workers in the building suffered an adverse reaction requiring medical treatment. The EPA improved the ventilation, banned smoking and replaced carpeting, wall and floor boards that were thought to be emitting offensive chemicals.

EPA management now minimizes the problems with the building, but the union isn't convinced. There are still 47 people who do their EPA work at home because they can't tolerate the air in the building. Twenty people have filed a \$45 million lawsuit against the owner of the building who leases it to the government.

"The building is Band-Aided all over the place," one EPA source told our reporter Nick Budnick.

The episode at EPA headquarters helped to make a national issue out of indoor air quality, and the union has continued to lobby for changes not only in their own building but all across the country. The question now is, does that and other pro-environment activities by the union constitute union business? And should it be done on office time?

The Civil Service Reform Act allows federal employee union leaders to do union business during their work day. But EPA lawyers say the union there is representing the interests of private environmental groups and calling it union business. From where we stand, it sounds like everyone's business. The union has continued to deal with outside environmental groups seeking indoor air quality reforms, has pushed for tough peer review of EPA scientific research, has questioned the amount of fluoride allowed in drinking water and this week testified before Congress on the Indoor Air Bill. The EPA doesn't think the union always has the scientific data to prove its points.

The current union president, Dwight Welch, was moved to a backwater job in the agency when he became too adamant about the need to put "flammable" warnings on indoor pesticide foggers or "bug bombs."

Earlier this year, the EPA brought in an outside consultant, described by the union as a "union buster" to give management a course in how to deal with union members. One source familiar with the course said it was "delivered with a rabid anti-union message."

The union has reported its complaints to the Federal Labor Relations Authority, and last week union members met with congressional staffers from the House and Senate asking for help. One key Senate staffer told us that the union presented "a very disturbing case of what could be going on over at EPA."

Management and union members describe each other in very harsh terms, and there is no love lost between the two groups. That isn't unusual in employee-management relations. But in this case, it looks like the employees are trying to do the job that the public expects out of the EPA.

Fluoride Action Network | 802-355-0999 | health@fluoridealert.org