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By Sue Davis
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On the picket line

Worker and public safety top 700,000-member AFGE health concerns

The American Federation of Government Employees, which represents 700,000 federal and D.C. government workers, has been vigorously protesting the Trump administration's inadequate response to the coronavirus pandemic. AFGE President Everett Kelley said in a memo the union "has serious concerns regarding the health and safety of the federal workforce and with the administration's efforts to prevent, detect and treat the Coronavirus." Of major priority are worker safety, protective equipment and hazardous duty pay.



Kelley added: “[A]gencies are not communicating with their workforces . . . to allow them to protect themselves or the public in a timely manner to contain the spread of this virus.” He specifically called out the needs of the thousands of workers who have daily contact with people, such as those in the Social Security and Veterans administrations and the Department of Homeland Security.

The union asked Congress to push all agencies to formally give permission to all employees who can work via telework to begin doing so immediately. Prior to the health crisis, the administration had been forcefully attempting to cut or cancel telework programs — although telework is mandated in the last contract. The union calls such administration attacks on its members “part of its ongoing war against federal workers and unions.” (afge.org, March 10)

Trump 2021 budget attacks workers’ rights and vital services

The vicious attacks on federal workers’ jobs and benefits, part of the Trump administration agenda beginning in 2017, was ramped up Feb. 10 when the 2021 government budget was released. Not only would the budget cut the already reduced number of federal jobs, but it would slash the number of days of paid leave and the government’s contribution to retirement pay. It would also change the pay system, so it would take longer for workers to advance up the pay scale. AFGE alleges that these changes are aimed at getting federal workers to retire or quit.

On top of the changes, the administration has reintroduced its plan to eliminate the Office of Personnel Management, which protects the government’s merit system, and transfer it to the Executive Office of the President — read “obvious nepotism.”

But that’s not all. The budget is being used to target vital services that women and gender-oppressed people need. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s historically low budget would be cut by \$27 million, making it harder to litigate workplace discrimination and sexual harassment cases. And millions would be chopped from the already underfinanced Violence Against Women Act. (afge.org, March 2)

UFCW slams Amazon’s job-cutting ‘cashierless’ grocery stores

The Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) denounced Amazon's opening of a cashier-less grocery store in Seattle. UFCW International President Marc Perrone contends Amazon's use of cashier-free technology reveals one of its main goals: "eliminate as many jobs as possible as it seeks to take over America's \$800 billion grocery industry." Calling Amazon "a clear and present danger to millions of good jobs," Perrone notes: "Amazon might share its cashier-free technology with other retailers and chains, such as movie theaters and airports, which would threaten jobs in these industries."

Perrone is calling on politicians and the public alike "to wake up and act before Amazon and Jeff Bezos do permanent damage to America's economy and the future of work."

The largest private sector union in the U.S., representing 1.3 million professionals in grocery stores and related industries, UFCW intends to make Amazon's business model a 2020 election issue. Perrone asks: "[W]ho will be left to buy the company's products if the job-killing behemoth succeeds in eliminating all the good-paying jobs?" (ufcw.org, March 3)

Austin bus drivers' campaign wins contract without a strike

Bus drivers in Austin, Texas, started a "Black Eye" campaign — smearing black makeup or tape under their eyes so they looked like football players — to protest tense contract negotiations, which might have led to a strike. Brent Payne, president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1091, explained: "[W]e've been getting punched in the face by MV Transportation and Capital Metro." (kxan.com, Feb. 21)

The protest helped win a decent contract without a strike. On March 1, the workers overwhelmingly ratified a contract with 8.5 percent wage increases and improved health benefits. The contract also unites 900 fixed-bus route drivers and maintenance workers who work at two Capital Metro facilities. Payne says, "I am proud of our members. They came together from two different bus depots — where they had been pitted against each other for years — and made their union . . . stronger." (atu.org, March 1)

Workers World 19.03.2020