

Subcommittee hears testimony on GAO pay system

Contributed by Kelly McCormack
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During a subcommittee hearing on federal workforce policy and pay issues last week, lawmakers re-analyzed a pay system at the Government Accountability Office (GAO).

The House Oversight and Government Reform Committee's Federal Workforce Postal Service and the District of Columbia subcommittee Chairman Danny Davis (D-Ill.) and Del. Eleanor Holmes-Norton (D-D.C.) heard testimony from Curtis Copeland, a Congressional Research Service (CRS) specialist in American national government, on the GAO's new pay system and a market-based study conducted by Watson Wyatt indicating that some GAO employees are overpaid. The GAO has used its findings as evidence to keep employees from getting raises.

"[Copeland's testimony] did not surprise me," Davis said. "These issues have been going on in Government Reform for quite some time. [It] was a reaffirmation of some of the thoughts and ideas we have had."

Davis yesterday told The Hill that he would hold a separate hearing on the GAO's pay system.

"We will expect to have a joint hearing with both the House and Senate present," Davis said. The hearing will probably take place in May, and Walker will be called to testify. According to Davis, it "will be an overview of what's taken place relative to employment issues at the GAO - especially given the fact that we often look to the GAO to advance or lead the way."

Davis said the hearing would track "information relative to how effective" the GAO's restructuring effort has been.

In Copeland's written testimony, he said information reviewed by CRS and other information "obtained from GAO and elsewhere did not detail how the 'market data' were gathered for the Watson Wyatt study.

"It is unclear how GAO occupations were analyzed and described; how Watson Wyatt and GAO ensured that the economic data used to determine market rates for GAO positions were valid and, in the words of the House report, 'specifically related to positions at GAO'; and the methodology used by Watson Wyatt to calculate the salary minimums, maximums and competitive rates," Copeland concluded.

The GAO used the Watson Wyatt findings, which analyzed pay caps for positions at the GAO, to show that employees who did not receive pay increases already were paid more than they should have been, Copeland's statement for the record confirmed.

In January 2006, approximately 17 percent of GAO employees did not receive pay increases.

However, CRS said that the GAO confirmed that the 308 employees who did not receive raises had "meets expectations" performance ratings, which would mean they were eligible for raises.

However, Copeland testified that GAO Comptroller General David Walker promised to give all employees with ratings of "meets expectations" or higher cost of living adjustments (COLAs).

"As long as employees are performing at the 'meets expectation' level or better, then they will be protected against inflation," Walker said at a 2003 hearing, according to Copeland's testimony.

In January, the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers (IFPTE) announced that GAO employees launched a union-organizing campaign intended to represent 1,500 agency analysts and analysts in field offices across the country.

Union representatives cited changes to the pay-for-performance system and the employees' classification as reasons for launching a union-organizing campaign. Union representatives have indicated that a vote will take place sometime this spring.

However, Holmes-Norton questioned the GAO initiative.

"When GAO employees find it so unsatisfactory that they unionize, it will kill these initiatives in government pay-banding and worker-initiated reforms," Holmes Norton said.