

ROLL CALL

Three Union Chiefs Testify on Morale Troubles at Agencies

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Union heads who represent employees at three top legislative branch agencies told House appropriators Tuesday that agency leaders have forged negative relationships with their workers, harming morale and subsequently the work they produce.

Dennis Roth, president of the Congressional Research Employees Association, Saul Schneiderman, president of the Library of Congress Professional Guild and George Lord, chairman of the Joint Council of Unions of the Government Printing Office, all testified separately before the House appropriations subcommittee on the legislative branch.

Before the hearing began, subcommittee Chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.) said it served to give agency employees a chance to have their say in matters not previously brought up by top-level management. For their part, each union official identified problems that have taken place at their respective agencies over the past few years.

Roth perhaps was the most critical of the bunch, taking Congressional Research Service Director Daniel Mulhollan and Librarian of Congress James Billington to task for a recent reduction-in-force process that affected 59 employees.

"In the Librarian's testimony before the subcommittee last month, the CRS reduction in force was declared a success," Roth said. "We cannot agree. We speak to the human cost of the action."

Aside from harming morale, Roth testified the RIF actually hindered the level of work produced by the agency. In recent months, CRS workers have been forced to focus on administrative tasks and internal reports rather than do the legislative research directed by Congress, Roth said.

Plus, Roth said, flexible work arrangements such as telecommuting, staff training and affirmative action programs all have suffered under Mulhollan. Meanwhile, labor-management relations have deteriorated, Roth said.

"CRS management appear to believe confrontation, rather than cooperation, is the best means to interact with its unions," Roth said.

When subcommittee ranking member Zach Wamp (R-Tenn.) asked Roth to grade Mulhollan's leadership, Roth replied: "needs improvement."

Roth added that Mulhollan needs "to change his management style from the parental need of telling people what to do. ... Let us develop relationships with the committees and staff."

In response, a CRS spokeswoman said Tuesday that the nature of their job requires employees to maintain independence, and Mulhollan supports such a setup.

"Our most successful employees are those who are able to work independently and at a very high level," spokeswoman Janine D'Addario said. "Through his leadership, the director endorses this role for CRS analysts and has worked to support it."

D'Addario defended the RIF, saying it "was necessitated by resource constraints and the need to improve efficiency." She added that Mulhollan has worked to support a range of diversity programs, staff training and special needs of staff through things such as telecommuting whenever is appropriate but "does not jeopardize the mission of CRS."

"While labor-management relations may involve a certain amount of tension, CRS always adheres to its principles, its mission and its goals," D'Addario said. "In addition, the director regularly meets with CRS staff in a variety of settings." Schniderman, who represents about 1,600 employees at the Library of Congress, told the panel that his union generally has had a positive relationship with management.

However, in recent months, management has undertaken "union busting" activities, demanding union officials give specific details about their meetings with staffers — including what departments employees work in and what they met with union officials about.

"Our fear is that this could identify the employee," Schniderman said. "It has to do with the level of specificity."

Library officials repeatedly have maintained that they are asking for relevant information designed to make sure union time is being used properly.

For their part, Wasserman Schultz and Wamp said they can do little to help with the dispute in the subcommittee.

Schniderman asked that they merely make sure that what they appropriate goes to things that will help employees and won't harm union efforts.

Much of Lord's criticism went to former Public Printer Bruce James, who left office in January. During his four-year term as head of the GPO, Lord said James and his management team focused on moving to a digital age so strongly that he managed to treat the work force as "square pegs."

"Their methods have created a sea change in the attitudes and confidence of each and every employee that the management never considered the employees its most valuable asset," Lord said. "This administration has created a bloated management structure that we do not need and certainly cannot afford."

Lord also said James' biggest dream — moving the GPO into a smaller complex in or near Washington, D.C. — will be a waste of money and is unnecessary.

Instead, Lord said, the GPO should rent out the building's empty space and reorganize its workers within the building.

"Why sell your house if it just needs a new roof?" Lord said.

GPO spokeswoman Caroline Scullin said the agency's transformation to a digital focus has made many jobs obsolete but that management has worked hard to help its employees.

"We have devoted significant resources to upgrade our existing workforce through training, most notably a new four-year apprentice program, a skills measurement and retraining program and a leadership development program," Scullin wrote in an e-mail. "The second part of our approach has been on recruiting and hiring the best and the brightest to fill key new roles in areas."

Scullin also maintained the need for a new building, saying that while the current 1.5 million gross square-foot complex on North Capitol Street may have worked for 10,000 staffers, it does not suit a work force of 2,200 employees.

"It no longer works efficiently, and it is draining money we could invest elsewhere," she said.

Wamp said he supports a new building for the GPO, as long as the facility is built by the private sector and then leased by the agency.

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