

FEDERAL

THE 'SICK BUILDING SYNDROME' is alive and well in many Washington, D.C., area office buildings where federal and District of Columbia employees work, according to fragmentary results of an employee survey conducted by a coalition including the American Federation of Government Employees. *Feature Report* (p. 311).

PRESIDENT BUSH IS SUED over his failure to name additional members to the Federal Labor Relations Authority. The National Treasury Employees Union charges that the authority's inability to act for lack of a quorum damages the union's organizing ability (p. 318).

SINGLING OUT FEDERAL EMPLOYEES is no way to reduce the budget, the House Post Office and Civil Service Committee tells the Budget Committee. It rejects most of President Bush's proposals to reduce benefits for federal workers (p. 312).

AN AGREEMENT ON CHILD CARE has been concluded between American Federation of Government Employees Council 214 and the Air Force Logistics Command covering 83,000 civilian employees. Management will operate the centers under the oversight of a joint union-management committee at each installation (p. 312).

AN EMPLOYEE'S CLAIM that the U.S. Postal Service breached his rights under a collective bargaining agreement must be dismissed because the employee did not also demonstrate a breach of the duty of fair representation by his union, the U.S. Claims Court says (p. 318).

STATE & LOCAL

IOWA STATE EMPLOYEES easily ratify a two-year contract with the state that calls for an 8.5 percent pay increase. More than 20,000 workers, represented by American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees Council 61, will receive a 3.5 percent pay raise, effective July 1, followed by another 5 percent in July 1990 (p. 338).

FREE SPEECH RIGHTS of a Crow Wing County employee are not violated by a state law permitting unions and employers to negotiate agency shop contracts with fair share fees for employees represented but not belonging to the union, the Minnesota Court of Appeals rules. Non-members pay only for bargaining and contract administration costs, the court finds (p. 331).

A THREE-WEEK STRIKE by 285 Groveport Madison school teachers in Ohio ends following unanimous ratification of a new three-year accord limiting class size and establishing "just cause" criteria for the dismissal of non-tenured staff. Pay will rise 10 percent over term (p. 339).

PHILADELPHIA POLICE OFFICIALS had reason to require drug tests of four officers suspected of using narcotics, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit finds, but they violated officers' rights by failing to give them enough information to defend themselves. The case is remanded (p. 332).

MORROW COUNTY, ORE., undergoes its first walkout as 143 teachers strike March 1 when contract talks break down after 15 months. School leaders say they will hire replacements (p. 325).

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FEATURE REPORT

POOR AIR QUALITY WIDESPREAD IN FEDERAL BUILDINGS, ACCORDING TO INITIAL RESULTS OF EMPLOYEE SURVEY

The sick building syndrome is alive and well in many Washington, D.C., area office buildings where federal and District of Columbia employees work, according to fragmentary results of a survey by the Safe Workplace Air Coalition.

According to the first 1,000 questionnaires returned after being distributed to approximately 18,000 federal and District of Columbia employees, 73.3 percent of respondents believe poor air quality at their office to be a problem and nearly 94 percent of the respondents said they suffered from an average of six of 10 symptoms listed. Of these, 83 percent of the employees who reported experiencing symptoms believe that poor indoor air quality is a major or contributing cause. Moreover, about 59 percent believe their agencies are not doing enough to provide clean air in the workplace. While releasing the results, the organization acknowledged that early returns may not be representative of the area workforce.

Most respondents with symptoms (74 percent) said they did not bring their complaints to the attention of management or their health unit. According to Jamie Yereb, of Consolidated Safety Services Inc., of Vienna, Va., the consulting firm that conducted the study, the feeling that management would do nothing was the main reason for this failure.

SWAC consists of American Federation of Government Employees District 14, which takes in the Washington metropolitan area, and the National Energy Management Institute. NEMI is a non-profit institute sponsored by the Sheet Metal Workers International Association and the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors National Association whose goal is to create new jobs for union contractors in energy and indoor air quality management.

Three Agencies Predominate

Of the first 1,000 respondents, 61 percent are women and nearly 77 percent work in three agencies: the Department of Health and Human Services; the Department of Labor; and the Census Bureau. More than half are in pay grade GS-11 and above. SWAC cautioned that because the preliminary results are based on the responses of those who returned their forms quickly, it is likely that the respondents "are more concerned about indoor air quality than a random sample would be." Moreover, the total pool of 18,000 employees was not randomly selected, the firm pointed out.

According to the survey, symptoms experienced by the respondents while at work ranged from the most common, drowsiness (reported by 74.7 percent of the respondents), to nosebleeds (16.3 percent). Because

more than 70 percent of the respondents said their symptoms become less bothersome after they leave work, SWAC says this finding points to "sick building syndrome" as the cause of these maladies. Although it acknowledges that the evidence is not conclusive, the coalition wants employing agencies and the General Services Administration to conduct a more elaborate study of the problem.

Agencies Uncooperative, Union Alleges

According to David Schlein, national vice president for AFGE Region 14, in many instances where GSA has delegated to employing agencies the chore of building administration, management has been uncooperative in easing sick building problems. He also said owners of buildings that GSA has leased for federal agencies also have been unhelpful in many instances. Moreover, no monitoring agency, including GSA, the Department of Labor, and the Environmental Protection Agency, has set standards for indoor air quality, Schlein said.

According to Schlein, agency footdragging makes no sense because the costs of correcting sick building syndrome should be less than the continuing loss of productivity, absenteeism, and other problems that the syndrome causes.

Frank Powell, of NEMI, said improved building ventilation is the best way to cut down on sick building syndrome. However, local distribution problems may exist even if the building as a whole is ingesting adequate quantities of fresh air. Powell also noted that building managers who turn off ventilation fans evenings and weekends to save on energy costs run the risk of having contaminants build up in the system. However, engineers now are learning how to design better and more energy-efficient air-filtration systems, Powell said.

Guy Boston, director of safety and environmental management for GSA's National Capital Region, told BNA that the agency has a formal policy on sick building syndrome. He said GSA conducts a full industrial hygiene survey of all buildings, owned and leased, every four years. Moreover, the agency will respond to meritorious employee or agency complaints received in the meantime. Boston said also that for the past three years the agency has been writing into leases minimum standards for air and water quality.

According to SWAC, the following problems are signs of a sick building: stuffy air, intermittent odors, excessive dust, smoke accumulation, dirty air diffuser grilles, uneven temperature zones, staff complaints, and high absenteeism.

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