

Statement by the AFL-CIO Executive Council

on

Employee Privacy

February 19, 1991

Bal Harbour, FL

Employers in increasing numbers are seeking to probe--and then to regulate--the most private aspects of their employees' lives away from work. The AFL-CIO opposes these invasions of employee privacy.

Employers continue to interrogate employees about their union sympathies, political beliefs, financial status and other personal matters.

Random drug testing policies applied without any requirement of reasonable suspicion of wrongdoing--which are inconsistent with a basic regard for worker dignity and autonomy--is now endemic in American workplaces.

To shift the blame for rising health care and compensation costs to their employees--and to further their personal agendas--employers are increasingly seeking to regulate workers' off-the-job behavior. These restrictions make use of the employer's economic leverage to prohibit workers from engaging in perfectly lawful activities. Employers go so far as to specify whether employees can smoke at home and what employees can eat or drink at their own dinner tables.

As a matter of course, employers also conduct medical exams and genetic tests to screen out employees thought to be at increased risk of developing a disease in the future. Medical screening reveals the most intimate details of employee health, including those that have no relation to job performance.

Secret employer telephone eavesdropping on employee-customer calls permitted through a little known loophole in the federal wiretap code, is yet another often-used technique that has no place in a free society.

These employer surveillance tactics undermine basic privacy and due process rights. Yet to date, there has been only limited legislative protection for these rights; the polygraph bill and the Americans with Disability Act are the most conspicuous exceptions. The AFL-CIO is committed to enhancing the dignity of working men and women and to preventing intrusions into workers' privacy. We support legislation that would go further than present law to preserve and enhance worker privacy and to outlaw management practices which intrude on those privacy interests.

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