



# Local 1998 News



Issue 11

National Federation of Federal Employees, IAMAW, AFL-CIO

October 2006

*Representing the bargaining unit employees of Passport Services, a division of the Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs*

## Issue Highlights: National Union/Management Council Raises Concerns

- NUMC Raises Concerns
- President's Message
- Grievance Update
- Where the Awards \$ and QSI's go
- Ergonomics Info
- Request Denied: Union asks Management to lower adjudication quotas
- 2006 Training Report

Passport Services Headquarters Management and the leadership of NFFE Local 1998 held their annual National Union/Management Council meeting on Monday, August 21, 2006 – taking a “break” from the two-week contract negotiations. The purpose of the National UMC meeting, like the office-level UMC's, is to both resolve traditional labor-management disputes in an informal, amicable manner and also to jointly seek better ways to accomplish the mission of the agency. The Union brought up a number of topics for the UMC: CLASS/Namecheck problems, anti-fraud resources, emergency plans and supplies, ergonomic issues, inherently governmental functions, and inconsistent adjudication practices.

The Union again requested that emergency supplies (including food and water) be purchased for all locations, and asked about having more training visits from the Department of State Ergonomics expert. The Union sought to clarify ergonomic supply policy, proposing that if equipment

can be readily obtained then employees should not have to wait months for the reasonable accommodations process to finish, and also that employees should be allowed to use existing chairs in the facility even if they defy aesthetic conformity. In addition, the Union is seeking to have additional ergonomics information, and more ergonomic-friendly equipment and policies.

Prior to the meeting, Union representatives surveyed the Passport Agencies and Centers on their adjudication practices and confirmed startling differences in policies, notational rules, evidentiary requirements, and procedures for how passport applications are adjudicated. Passport Specialists across the country have the same standards, elements, and position descriptions, but are adjudicating in very different ways. Some of the differences, especially in CLASS/Namecheck, are potentially serious threats to the integrity of the process, and the Union sought to have those problems resolved.

## Local 1998 Executive Board

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Two Feathers Neal - NY

Sharlene Dandridge - PA

Marie Cooke - NPC

Amha Gezahegn - SF

Jennifer Gile - SE

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Keacha Medley - WN

## President's Message: 25 Year Anniversary of Local 1998

On October 19, 1981, the Federal Labor Relations Authority certified a vote by bargaining unit employees of Passport Services to authorize, for the first time, a labor organization to serve as their collective representative and NFFE Local 1998 was born! This month we mark the 25-year anniversary of that event, and all that has transpired since then.

During that time NFFE Local 1998 has negotiated five collective bargaining agreements (“contracts”) which have addressed employee rights, work schedule options, more fair methods for evaluating performance, leave issues, safety and health rules, a grievance and alternate dispute resolution procedure, and other concerns voiced by employees. While always seeking to resolve disputes informally and quickly, the Union has had to file a number of grievances and Unfair Labor Practice charges over the years.

We have helped employees receive their career ladder promotions, successfully appealed the denial of a security clearance, fought contracting out of Passport Services jobs (successful at first, unsuccessful in the end), obtained additional work schedules options (and preserved them), corrected the FLSA status of hundreds employees – with



\$306,401.09 in back pay plus untold thousands of dollars since then with true time-and-one half for OT work, responded to proposed disciplinary and performance-based actions (downgrades, removals, suspensions, and reprimands), disputed denials of leave, contested hostile work environments, sought improved health and safety, and addressed many other issues.

These accomplishments have been achieved under the leadership of our current and former Union representatives, with the expertise and assistance of NFFE and, since our affiliation in 1999, the IAMAW. However, none of what we have accomplished over the years could have happened without the choice of many employees to pay their dues and become Union members. Their solidarity and commitment has been and continues to be the foundation of our labor organization, and all bargaining unit employees owe them a debt of gratitude.

- Colin Patrick Walle

### Local 1998 Address

PO Box 2221

Seattle, WA 98111

### Website

[www.nffe1998.org](http://www.nffe1998.org)

## 2006 Grievance Update

The Union and Management should always strive to resolve disputes quickly, informally, and amicably. However, it is inevitable that some disputes must be resolved with grievances. So far this year, the Union has filed a routine number of grievances, including (but not limited to) the following subjects:

- Career Ladder Promotion (GS-5 to GS-6): Arbitration invoked in July (Security Awareness Element rating corrected)
- Career Ladder Promotion (GS-9 to GS-11): resolved by ADR in July
- Career Ladder Promotion (GS-9 to GS-11): still pending
- Career Ladder Promotion (GS-9 to GS-11): filed in October
- Desk Move: resolved in May
- Letter of Warning: resolved in March
- 2005 Appraisal (GS-7): rejected by Management

(cont'd)

- 2005 Appraisal (GS-11): resolved in April
- 2004 Appraisal (GS-11): rejected by Management
- 2005 Appraisal (GS-11): still pending
- Respect/Dignity/Corrective Actions: resolved in September
- Health & Security Risk: mostly rejected by Management, partially resolved
- Denial of Official Time: filed in October
- Corrective Actions: still pending
- Change in Nationwide Past Practice (Admin Leave): resolved in March
- Change in Past Practice (Admin Leave): still pending
- Security Awareness Violation: resolved in April
- Job Announcement: resolved in June
- Hostile Work Environment: resolved by ADR in March
- Unreasonable Performance Standards: resolved in April

## Show me the money! Where the Awards & QSI's go . . .

In the January 2006 survey conducted of all bargaining unit employees by the Union, 45% of employees indicated that they believed that the distribution of awards is not fair, 35% stated they were neutral or did not know, and 20% voiced their belief that the awards are distributed fairly. At that time, there was no widespread knowledge of who received awards and for how much, so employees completed the survey based on their perceptions from things in their own offices they had seen and heard.

The Union has now done an analysis of awards distribution, based on information provided by Management per Article 19 of the contract. The information provided did not include awards received by the two highest managerial positions in Passport Services, but it did include the amounts and types of awards received by all staff.

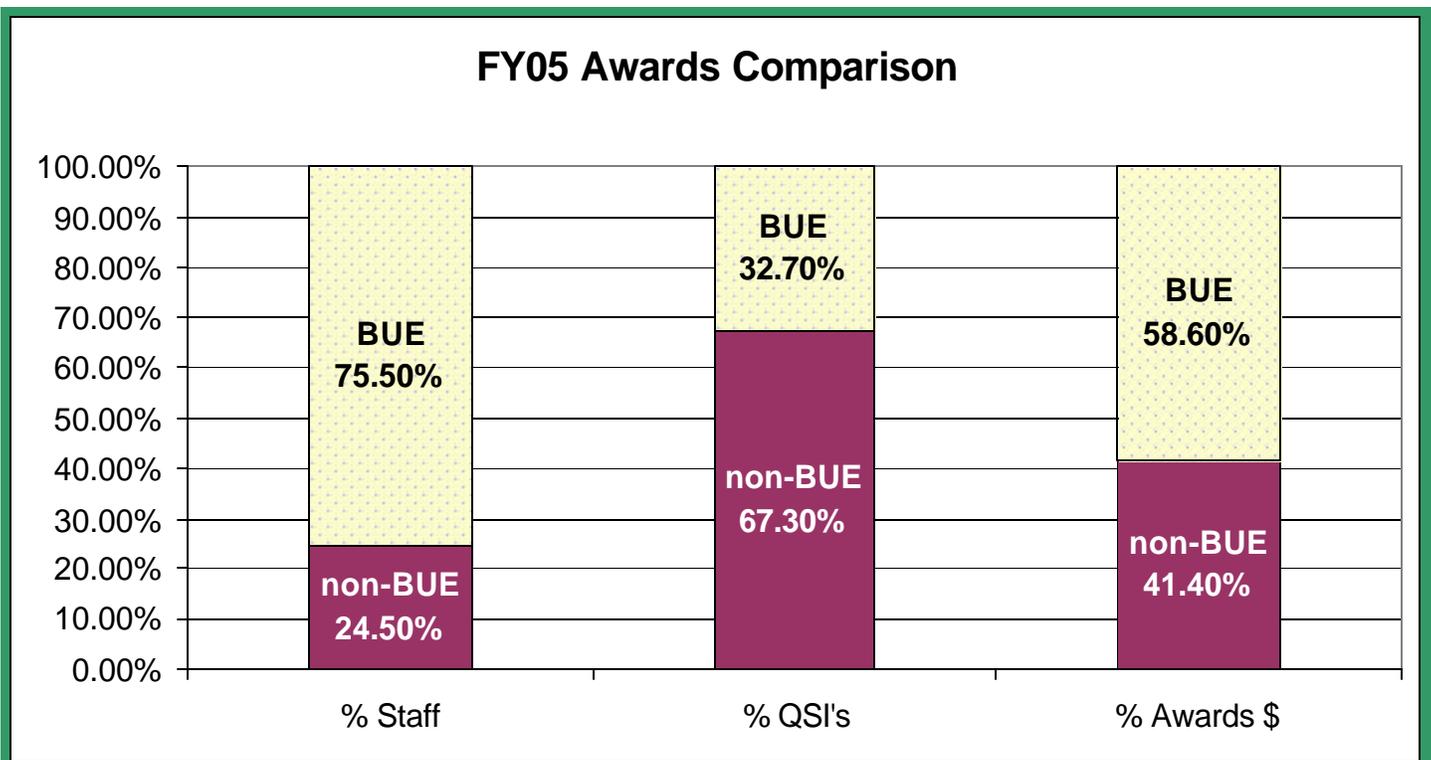
While bargaining unit employees (e.g., passport specialists, processors, contact representatives) made up 75% of the total

Passport Services staff in January 2006, they received 58.6% of the awards dollars and 32.7% of the QSI's distributed in FY 2005. Non-bargaining unit staff include supervisors, managers, system administrators, operations officers, secretaries, and other positions.

In the four years covered by FY 2001 – FY 2004, bargaining unit employees received almost 52% of the QSI's while other staff received slightly over 48%. In FY 2004, that 25% of the staff that is not in the bargaining unit staff received over 40% of the awards dollars. These statistics show that managers, supervisors, and other non-bargaining unit staff have received awards funding and QSI's out of proportion to their total percentage of the staff.

What do you think about this distribution of awards dollars? Is this fair or reasonable? Please send your comments to:

[NFFE-1998@state.gov](mailto:NFFE-1998@state.gov).



# What you need to know about Office Ergonomics

By Jennifer Gile, Senior Steward - PPT/SE & Ergonomics Officer

As Ergonomics Officer, I am currently building on the foundation laid by the Union and Management at the February 2005 UMC meeting. With over 700 full-time employees and many more coming on board, it is important that working conditions be organized so as to minimize ergonomic injuries and consequently maximize production.

## What constitutes an ergonomic injury?

According to the Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA), ergonomic injuries, scientifically known as *musculoskeletal disorders (MSD's)*, are triggered by "both work-related and non-work related conditions [that] can either individually, or by interacting with each other" cause damage to your body. In other words, your MSD could be caused by something that isn't work related, like a sports injury, but sitting in a chair that isn't right for your body will exacerbate your MSD. There is no single diagnosis for MSD's, but some of the most common are ones are tendonitis, tenosynovitis (related to arthritis), epicondylitis (tennis elbow), carpal tunnel syndrome, bursitis, deQuervain's disease (washer women's sprain), ganglion cysts and thoracic outlet syndrome. Even sprains, strains and tears may constitute an MSD.

For more information, please visit OSHA's ergonomic website:

<http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/ergonomics/index.html>

## What should you do if you think you have an MSD?

**TELL YOUR SUPERVISOR!** This is something that should be documented as early as possible. If you have to take sick leave because of your MSD, make sure to include it on the leave slip. Also, your supervisor or operations officer may be able to help you rearrange your desk to alleviate your MSD without requiring you to see a doctor. Minor changes may include a footrest, wrist rest or lumbar support for your chair. If they can't help you because the item is too expensive for the agency to buy, go to your doctor and get a diagnosis.

Depending on your problem, it may be helpful to take a picture of your desk setup so they can get a better idea of what changes can help you--- Just make sure there are no sensitive documents on your desk! The doctor may recommend that you see an occupational or ergonomic specialist or a physical therapist. They should be able to tell you what is causing your MSD, give you helpful exercises and tell you what kinds of changes will help you get better. Request that they put your MSD and recommendation for office changes in writing. Give a copy to your supervisor and then look into filing a Reasonable Accommodation or Computer/Electronics Accommodations Program request.

Also, **TELL YOUR UNION REP!** Your Rep needs to know about your situation so that he/she can advocate for you and your coworkers.

## What are these programs?

Reasonable Accommodation is through the Bureau of Human Resources Work/Life Programs. It assists employees with dis-

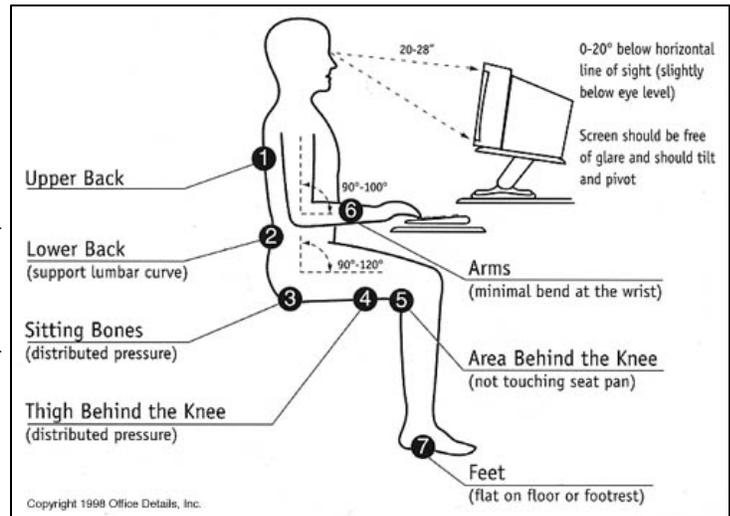


Diagram courtesy of Nismat.org

abilities and is provided for by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended and the Americans with Disabilities Act. The Computer/Electronics Accommodations Program was originally a DoD program, but was expanded in 2000 to assist Federal employees in other Departments. While the word "disability" may seem like too strong a word, in fact MSD's are debilitating and should be taken seriously. They not only affect your work production, but more importantly, your quality of life.

To submit a request, you **MUST** have medical documentation. It should be MSD specific, in other words, it can't just say that you're in pain. Go to the websites (listed below) to help you make a decision on which program will best help you. When submitting an application, make sure to be specific about how your MSD affects your job performance and how their accommodation will help you better perform your job.

Examples of past accommodations include larger monitors, ergonomic pens and electronic hole-punchers. Be forewarned: this is a lengthy process, so don't delay submitting your request after you see a doctor. If you have had to take leave without pay because of your MSD, you may also wish to file a Workers' Compensation claim.

## For more information, please visit the following websites:

*Reasonable Accommodation*

<http://hrweb.hr.state.gov/er/worklife/DisabilityServices/disabilityaccomfact.html>

*Computer/Electronics Accommodation Program*

[http://www.tricare.osd.mil/cap/accom\\_process/Request.cfm?type=request](http://www.tricare.osd.mil/cap/accom_process/Request.cfm?type=request)

*Workers' Compensation*

[http://www.dol.gov/esa/owcp\\_org.htm](http://www.dol.gov/esa/owcp_org.htm)

## Ergonomic tip:

Keyboard wrist rests are not designed to use while you are typing, but instead when you are taking a break, otherwise they could cause or exacerbate damage to your wrists!

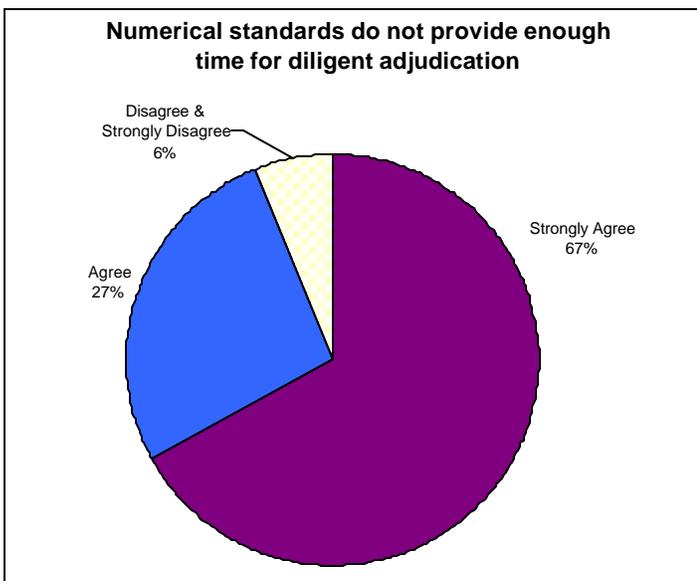
## In the next issue...

- > The results of the Ergonomic Survey sent out June 2006.
- > Review of the OSHA Principles of Ergonomics course.

## Union asks HQ to lower Adj quotas

On September 8, 2006 Union President Colin Walle once again formally requested that Passport Services provide additional time for Passport Specialists to diligently adjudicate passport applications by lowering the numerical standard. Walle cited the January 2006 survey which confirmed an overwhelming consensus among adjudicators that they do not have enough time to do the job right. He also tried to dispel the notion the simply because most workers meet the quota that means it is fine. Since our job (promotions/awards/retention) is predicated on making the quota, it should be no surprise that employees produce at the required rate of speed. The adjudicators concern is that because we must rush, we are vulnerable to fraudulent attempts to obtain passports.

On October 2, 2006, Passport Services HQ formally denied the Union's request. While acknowledging that the perception of the employees "is always important", HQ cited the fact that less than 1% of employees failed to meet the standard and 65% exceeded the standard in 2005. HQ invited the Union to produce proof that frauds have been issued in error as a result of rushing through adjudication. The memo concluded by expressing Management's faith that there are "no doubts that the integrity of the U.S. passport is secure and that our employees are measured by a fair and obtainable standard".



## Ch-Ch-Ch-Ch-Changes

One of a Union's most important roles is to ensure changes in working conditions are done fairly, reasonably, and only when necessary. For example, in December 2004 HQ unilaterally changed the past practice for administrative leave during the holidays, and the Union grieved that change. The parties successfully resolved the dispute in March 2006. Similarly, at CPC, Management recently changed the past practice whereby employees who participated in the CFC Day of Caring received a full day of administrative leave to now only grant 4 hours. The Union is grieving this change in past practice. In Philadelphia, Management initially planned to use a random drawing to determine desk moves but reverted to the past practice of using seniority after being reminded. In New Orleans, employees returning after Hurricane Katrina were abruptly forced to move to new desks, which caused a number of problems. The Union grieved this action, and Management agreed to not repeat this same mistake.



Back row: IAMAW's Frank Carelli, Colin Walle, Two Feathers Neal, and Rob Arnold. Front row: Debra Reese-Jolly, Mirna Lopez, NFFE's Cassie Kerner, and Leah Anderson. - March 2006 Federal Employees Seminar

## Union Rep 2006 Training Report

Four of your Union representatives work with you as Contact Representatives, and the remaining thirty-three work as Passport Specialists. So, how do they know how to file a grievance, or negotiate over a change in policy, or represent your views? While much of the training for a Union rep is OTJ ("on the job"), the reps are granted 40 hours of administrative leave each year to attend training normally at the IAMAW's Winpisinger Center in Placid Harbor, Maryland. While the food is great and the facilities are beautiful, the week spent at Placid Harbor is no vacation, with the session beginning on Sunday afternoon, classes running from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM daily, and homework, projects, or other presentations to attend after dinner.

Eleven reps have attended or will attend the Federal Employees Seminar at Placid Harbor this year. In this class, representatives learn about the grievance and arbitration procedures, the Hatch Act and the difference between political and legislative action, prohibited personnel practices and the Office of Special Counsel, Unfair Labor Practices and the Federal Labor Relations Authority, strategic planning, and effective communication. During the March class, Local President Colin Walle, Vice President Mike Garofano, and Secretary-Treasurer Rob Arnold also gave 4 additional evening presentations to the Local 1998 reps only, covering the website, the history of the local, and our negotiated grievance procedure.

The Winpisinger Center also offers a four-part series of leadership courses that cover these same types of topics but also include role playing and more development of communication skills. By the end of 2006, 2 more reps will have attended Leadership 1, 3 will have attended Leadership 2, and 3 will have attended Advanced Leadership. In addition, at least 2 will have attended the intensive Federal Collective Bargaining class.

## Have you seen this book?

All employees are required to be given a copy of the contract (pictured at the right). This is the collective bargaining agreement that governs many policies and procedures that affect you. If you do not have a copy, contact your Union representative to obtain one. Also, read it on our website: [www.nffe1998.org](http://www.nffe1998.org).

