



# One Voice, Union Strong

Local 1998 of the National Federation of Federal Employees, IMAAW, AFL-CIO

Representing the employees of Passport Services, a division of the Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs, since Oct. 19, 1981

## From night to day: Union helps expectant mother move shifts

By PPT/WN Union Steward Tanika Jenkins

In July of 2007 Ileana Vazquez Marquez came from Puerto Rico to work at the Washington Passport Agency. Soon after her start at the Agency, on October 29<sup>th</sup> 2008 the newlywed was forced to go to the nightshift.

In November 2008, Ileana found out that she and her husband were expecting their first child. While excited about the new venture in her life, Ileana was extremely worried about her condition and working the nightshift (7:00 PM to 5:30 AM). Also, Ileana's husband's schedule varied, which made the couple all the more worried about the situation. She said, "I am worried, new to the mainland, I only have my husband, who is going to take care of the baby while I am on nightshift?"

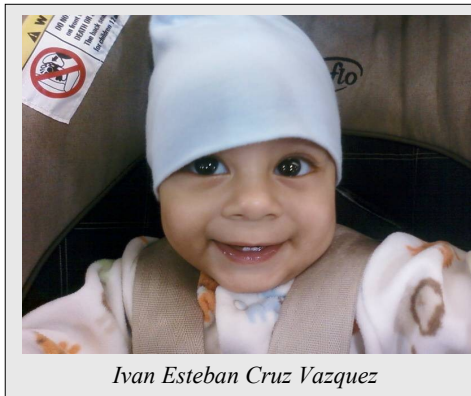
Ileana's physician decided in March

2008 that it was unhealthy for a pregnant woman in her condition to continue working a nightshift schedule. Ileana immediately contacted Chief Steward Karen Proctor-Adams and President Colin Walle for help.

With Colin's words of encourage-

ment, Ileana was really hopeful and trusted that "the union will try to help me and it would work out." The Union advocated to Management on Ileana's behalf and, soon after, she returned to the day shift on March 24, 2008.

On May 29, 2008 Ivan Esteban Cruz Vazquez was born and is now a healthy 11 month old baby boy. Ileana asserts that she is really happy and grateful for what the Union has done for her. Since joining the Union in February 2009, she says that she has been encouraging colleagues to join because "the Union has really proven to her that they are concerned about its members." In Ileana's words, "I just want to thank you for all your efforts. I can imagine working with this matter was very hard. I really appreciate it with all my heart, now I can have my baby and stay calm and have peace."



Ivan Esteban Cruz Vazquez

## Eyes wide shut no longer; GAO test confirms Union's concerns

By Secretary-Treasurer Jennifer Gile

This Spring, the Department of State (DOS) and Local 1998 learned that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conducted four separate tests of the passport process from July through December 2008. The GAO investigator succeeded in obtaining genuine US passports, issued at the Washington Passport Agency, and released a report on March 16, 2009 entitled "Undercover Tests Reveal Significant Vulnerabilities in State's Passport Issuance Process" (see page 3). According to the report, the "investigation shows that terrorists or criminals could steal an American citizen's identity, use basic counterfeiting skills to create fraudulent documentation for that identity, and obtain a genuine U.S. passport from State."

A DOS spokesperson told the *Washington Post* that the test "certainly opened our eyes to problems" with the passport issuance process.

Local 1998 has warned Passport Services Management repeatedly about a number of vulnerabilities in the passport adjudication process that make it all too easy for fraudulent applicants to succeed in their attempts. In a Union survey of adjudicators started in late February 2009, 95% said that production quotas needed to be lowered in order to improve efforts to prevent passport fraud.

Some welcome changes have arisen from the GAO test. Among the changes is a temporary suspension of adjudication production quotas for 2009, giving passport specialists the

time necessary to diligently search for fraud. Changes have been made to the adjudication software, giving passport specialists more up-to-date information. Also, Passport Management has agreed with a longstanding Union proposal that each office should have access to black/UV lights to reveal identification security features.

A side effect of the ongoing review is a new emphasis on notations. Currently there is no notational policy, however from office to office and even from team to team, passport specialists are expected to use different notations when adjudicating passport applications. The Union filed a grievance on behalf of all passport specialists, on the basis that employees cannot be evaluated on a notational error rate while there is no notational policy

## Arbitration scheduled for May 21

By Union Vice President Rob Arnold

Headquarters handed down letters of warning to dozens of Passport Specialists in November 2008 for what they deemed improper PIERS searches. The viewed files included those of celebrities and politicians. While some Passport employees admitted to improper “curiosity searches,” some stated the access was related to adjudication of applications and some did not recognize the actors in their civilian names. Others could not recall the reason for a search done more than 6 years ago.

When the Union filed a grievance over these penalties, Management countered that letters of warning were not subject to grievances. This question must be settled before the appropriateness of the penalty can even be discussed. Current plans call for an arbitration hearing to take place May 21<sup>st</sup>.

## Website Under Construction!

By Secretary-Treasurer Jennifer Gile

Local 1998’s website, [www.nffe1998.org](http://www.nffe1998.org), has a great new look that incorporates the new NFFE logo (featured in the January 2009 newsletter) and a new design. Aside from the cosmetic improvements, we have also added some nifty new features. One is a “Write to Congress” box where you can enter your 5-digit zip code and it will take you to an IAMAW website listing all of your elected officials from the President to your state legislature representative. Another addition is the “Machinists News Update,” which displays the latest labor-related news stories from the IAMAW website.

We also have a new section entitled “Union Membership.” This section is for current and prospective dues-paying members and provides detailed information on the benefits of Union membership. Finally, we are in the process of updating our new “Union Stewards” section that includes the names of all Local 1998 representatives as well as the training and informational resources vital to every Union representative. Our current webmaster, Union President Colin Walle will be attending the “Basic Web Development” course at the IAM’s Winpisinger Center during the first week of June.



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

## Another FLSA Grievance filed

By Union President Colin Patrick Walle

Many employees may recall the grievance filed back in 2004 over the Fair Labor Standards Act status of employees that resulted in \$306,401.09 in back pay. Local 1998, again with help from attorney Mike Snider and NFFE General Counsel Susan Grundmann, filed another FLSA grievance on March 6th. Most employees have correct FLSA status, which will not change.

## Contract negotiations resume in June

By Union President Colin Patrick Walle

Passport Services and Local 1998 have scheduled mediation for the week of June 8th in Washington, DC. The parties have been negotiating over a successor to the current collective bargaining agreement since January 2006, but have not met face-to-face since November 2007. This may very well be the last face-to-face meeting and hopefully all remaining issues will be resolved. If the parties cannot reach agreement, then depending on the nature of the disputes they may be referred either to the Federal Service Impasses Panel or to the Federal Labor Relations Authority.

## Operations Officers included in the Passport Services bargaining unit

By Union President Colin Patrick Walle

Operations Officers in the Passport Agencies and Megacenters were recognized as bargaining unit employees as the result of a settlement agreement signed by the Union and Management on February 27th.

The Union sought to determine why every newly-created position (including the Operations Officers, Regional Training Coordinators, etc.) was being excluded from the bargaining unit. Being excluded from the bargaining unit means that these employees were not entitled to Union representation and couldn’t, for example, file a grievance using the negotiated grievance procedure. However, the Union’s efforts to get an answer to this question were unsuccessful, so a “Clarification of Unit” petition was submitted to the Federal Labor Relations Authority (FLRA). The FLRA investigated the petition and held a number of productive conference calls between the Union and Management to get to the bottom of this question.



He’s baaack! Former Union Vice President Mike Garofano, now an Operations Officer at NPC, is once again recognized as a bargaining unit employee.

After going over the duties of the various positions, the parties agreed to recognize that the Operations Officers “in the field” are bargaining unit employees while the other positions are not. As the investigation examined whether the positions should be excluded from the unit based on the duties the employees were actually performing, the recognition of the Operations Officers’ bargaining unit status should have no material impact on the duties they perform.

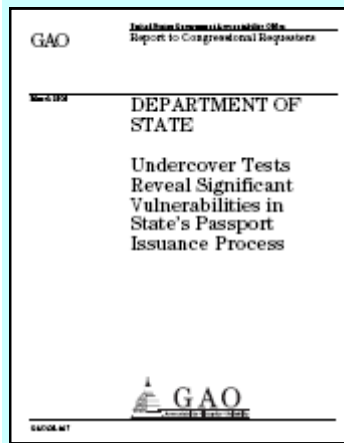
This decision is significant in another way - some of the Operations Officers positions go up to the GS-12 grade. This is the first time Local 1998 has bargaining unit members at this grade level.

## GAO investigation, cont. from page 1

and no notational error rate in the performance elements.

The four passport specialists who approved the applications had their adjudication privileges suspended. The State Department touted the suspension of the employees' adjudication privileges in statements to the media and to the GAO. According to an April 13, 2009 letter from the GAO to Senators Jon Kyl and Diane Feinstein, "State officials told us that a combination of human error and a lack of access to information resulted in the failures identified by our undercover tests. According to State, passport specialists did not wait for the results of a required SSA database check before approving our fraudulent applications."

In response to the scapegoating of the four passport specialists, Local 1998 filed a grievance and NFFE National issued a press release on April 21, 2009, quoting Local 1998 President Colin Walle, "I need to set the record straight because the State



Department's comments are inaccurate...Passport employees were instructed to move forward with the processing of passport applications and not to wait for certain checks that would slow the adjudication process. The agency made that decision, and they are responsible. They should not be blaming the employees." Deputy Assistant Secretary Brenda Sprague then issued the following statements to [www.govexec.com](http://www.govexec.com), "We

never provided a clear directive that all work had to be held on a Social Security check to come back...That means the specialists and their supervisors might have been unclear about the security procedures surrounding passport approval...That's a systemic problem, and I take full responsibility for that." She also indicated that "State is considering recommendations in an April 13 GAO letter following up on the March report, and will work with the union to implement additional training, standardize procedures for verifying applicants' identification information, and adopt other security tools such as facial recognition software."

Local 1998 hopes that the GAO tests will be a learning experience that leads to critically necessary improvements to the passport process and that Management will commit to working with the Union to make these changes quickly and effectively.

## Steward Spotlight: Amha Gezahegn

By Union Vice President Rob Arnold

Employee morale and local Union participation were both decidedly low when Amha Gezahegn was elected San Francisco Senior Steward in 2002. There were only two union members. Management made changes without warning, even refusing to take questions at agency meetings. Supervisors walked around with clipboards to record the second that employees arrived at work. The office was dirty and dusty, with unknown particles drifting from the air vents. "That time is gone," Amha says in reflecting on the bad old days. "The Union has made a great difference."



San Francisco Senior Steward Amha Gezahegn

Seven years and a great deal of effort have made a difference. San Francisco Passport Specialists' desks all have phones, which was not always the case. Employees are now treated like adults and their questions get addressed. A previous Regional Director, against whom a number of actions were filed by the Union, was replaced. Today the Regional Director is Susan Moorse, to whom Amha attributes many of the improvements. Most of the change came about through Labor-Management discussions rather than the grievance process. "I still try to work it out with them," Amha describes his approach to Labor-Management relations.

The pre-existing workspace is now much cleaner and the agency recently expanded into larger office space. During the renovations, Regional Director Moorse involved Amha in some aspects of the new layout. He requested and received the addition of a sink for the employee break room. Current Management is much more knowledgeable about the importance of informing and consulting with the Union on changes. San Francisco Management and the Union are currently discussing a compressed work schedule policy for the office.

As working conditions improved, San Francisco Union membership tripled, and then tripled again. Membership currently stands at seventeen, and Amha was recently joined by Scott Mullins as the new San Francisco Steward.

In 2007, Amha was called upon as a last-minute replacement on the Union's national contract negotiating team. Despite the gargantuan pile of draft proposals he received a week before the session, he made valuable contributions to the language in the new agreement (now nearing completion – hopefully).

## Three ULP's investigated by FLRA

By Union Vice President Rob Arnold

Local 1998 currently has three Unfair Labor Charges against Management filed in two separate FLRA regions. The unusually high number of ULP charges is partly a reflection of the relative upheaval occurring throughout the agency this year. Unfortunately, it also reflects greater disagreement with Management on important issues from previous years.

ULP #1: Management negotiated with the Union over new critical elements for Passport Specialists in 2008. Management refused to negotiate over new critical elements for everyone else (Contact Reps, Cashiers, Processing employees, etc), claiming the right to determine those elements without Union input.

ULP #2: Management terminated a Union Steward who was also a probationary employee. Management cited, in part, the discipline given to the employee for the language and tone he used during a Union-Management discussion. The Union charged that the employee's statements were a protected right under federal labor law, and that the other rationale offered for his dismissal was also without merit.

ULP #3: Management introduced new Internal Control Guidelines in late 2008. The Union requested to negotiate over the impact and implementation of the numerous changes and submitted proposals. However, Management implemented their new regulations without bargaining.

The ULP process is not quick, however it carries no financial risk, unlike grievance arbitration. We'll keep you posted.

## Benefits Corner

By Secretary-Treasurer Jennifer Gile

There are many benefits available only to dues-paying members that can be viewed at <http://www.nffe1998.org/bylaws.htm>. Due to our affiliation with the AFL-CIO, members are also eligible for valuable Union Plus discounts and programs.

Want to show someone special how much you care? Dues-paying members get 20% off all floral arrangement orders, gifts and baskets from Teleflora. All flowers are from local flower shops and all orders are hand delivered. To use your discount, call 1-888-667-7779 or visit [www.unionplus.org](http://www.unionplus.org) and click on "Home and Technology."



Spanish Leadership I class at the IMAW's Winpisinger Education and Technology Center, held in March 2009. PPT/NY rep Alejandro Rodriguez is standing in the middle row, far left.

## Liderazgo I en español

By PPT/NY Union Steward Alejandro Rodriguez

### En español:

La IAM esta ampliando su oferta educativa para sus miembros. Los cursos de Liderazgo I y II se estan ofreciendo en español, para cumplir con su matricula hispanoparlantes. Tuve la suerte de participar en el curso de Liderazgo I. El curso fue sumamente intenso, activo e interesante. Los recursos eran excelentes, sin embargo, el mejor recurso de todos fueron los hermanos y hermanas que aportaron su experiencia, creanme hay mucho que aprender de nuestros companeros hispanos tanto los de aquí, Estados Unidos como los que nos acompañaron desde America Central. Mis saludos a mis nuevos amigos de toda America Latina y mis gracias a IAM por esta iniciativa.

### English translation:

The IAM is broadening their educational offerings for their members. Leadership I and II are being offered in Spanish, to include there Spanish speaking members. I had the luck of participating in Leadership I. The course was intense, active and interesting. Resources where excellent, but the best resource was the brother and sisters that shared there experiences. Trust me there is a lot to learn from our Latin American brothers and sisters, both those who live here and those who visited us from central America. Greetings to my new friends of all over Latin America and my thanks to IAM for this initiative.



NFFE Local 1998 members in Seattle throw Union President Colin Walle a surprise birthday party!

## Local 1998 membership growth

By Secretary-Treasurer Jennifer Gile

The number of dues-paying Local 1998 members has continued to expand throughout the Spring. Since the January 2009 newsletter was published, we have gained 29 new members. Despite losing some members to promotions, transfers and attrition, we now have a record-breaking total of 369 dues-paying members out of 1,373 eligible bargaining unit employees. Welcome everyone and thank you for your support.

In addition to many new members, we also have many new stewards and senior stewards this year, who include: Tonia Aikens, Melanie Brandt, Dale Chai, Lynette Frowner, Kenneth Howard, Scott Mullins, Millie Nunez, James Rideaux and Jeri Titus. I would like to take this opportunity to extend a heartfelt "thank you" to all of our Local 1998 representatives, but especially to those of you who became stewards or even senior stewards the day you joined our ranks. Way to step up!

### NFFE Local 1998 Nationwide Union Reps

**President** Colin Patrick Walle; **Vice President** Rob Arnold; **Secretary-Treasurer** Jennifer Gile; **Recording Secretary** (Vacant); **Chief Steward** Karen Proctor-Adams; **Trustees** (3 Vacant)

### NFFE Local 1998 Local Senior Stewards

**BN:** Janis Galvin; **CPC:** (Vacant); **CG:** Eva Brumfield; **CO:** Corrina Davis; **CT:** (Vacant); **DE:** Tonia Aikens; **HH:** Ted Palmer; **HN:** Lisa Bohannon; **HQ:** Kamaria Blandford; **LA:** Isis Press; **MM:** Dale Chai; **NO:** Debra Reese-Jolly; **NY:** Two Feathers Neal; **PA:** Sharlene Dandridge; **NPC:** Helen Bechard; **SF:** Amha Gezahegn; **SE:** Sang Hwang; **SIA:** Melanie Brandt; **WN:** Melissa Toby

### NFFE Local 1998 Local Stewards

**BN:** (Vacant); **CPC:** Boyd Hinton, Brian Ollivierre & Kenneth Howard; **CG:** Claude Scott & Jeri Titus; **CO:** Deborah Hetrick; **CT:** (Vacant); **DE:** (Vacant); **HH:** (Vacant); **HN:** Butrina Tolbert & James Rideaux (1 Vacant); **HQ:** (Vacant); **LA:** Lynnette Frowner; **MM:** Ana Mercado (1 Vacant); **NO:** Jeanette Triplett & Donald Roberts (1 Vacant); **NY:** Alejandro Rodriguez & Millie Nunez; **PA:** (2 Vacant); **NPC:** Brian Rigolizzo, Susan Lagle, Arthur Levant & Michelle Tardiff; **SF:** Scott Mullins; **SE:** Rachel Devlin & Barb Krell; **SIA:** (1 Vacant); **WN:** Tanika Jenkins & Josue Trinidad-Perez (1 Vacant)

*For interest in filling a vacant position or if you are an employee at CT needing assistance, please contact the Union President.*