

The Washington Post

Federal workers campaign against proposed cuts

Washington Post Staff Writer

By Lisa Rein

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Fresh from its annual conference on Capitol Hill, the federal government's largest union is launching a \$1 million-plus campaign across the country to fight looming cuts to the workforce.

"We're acknowledging that it's our union that has to carry the story of federal workers," John Gage, the outspoken president of the said Wednesday as the four-day legislative conference wrapped up.

"We're going to energize and activate 2 million federal employees and their families," Gage said, "to let their representatives know these attacks will destroy [federal] agencies." AFGE has joined forces with other federal unions to fend off the targeted cuts.

The union, whose 270,000 dues-paying members range from Defense Department custodians to Environmental Protection Agency lawyers, plans a radio and newspaper campaign this month to promote the workforce. When Congress breaks for the President's Day holiday, rank-and-file employees in every member's district will line up to meet with their representative. And the union, an open shop, plans an organizing blitz to boost membership.

"We have more people in congressional

districts than even the congressmen are aware of," Gage said. "The idea is to say, 'I'm the nurse at the VA hospital down the street. I'm not a faceless bureaucrat.'" He has retained a public relations consultant to lead the campaign and commissioned a survey due this week of how the public views federal employees.

Federal workers have been targeted by both Republican lawmakers and the White House as both seek to reduce the deficit by reorganizing and reducing government. President Obama announced a five-year freeze on some non-security spending and a major reorganization of government in his State of the Union speech in January, after signing a two-year pay freeze late last year.

About that time, the president's fiscal commission proposed increasing employees'

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contributions to their health and retirement benefits and cutting the workforce by 10 percent. Republicans in the House majority have proposed deeper cuts, including furloughs and a ban on union work on government time.

The union's efforts come about a week before President Obama's proposed fiscal 2012 budget is set for release, and union members are anticipating changes that will affect them.

The 800 AFGE leaders in Washington this week knocked on the doors of their congressional representatives, with mixed reception. On Tuesday, close to 1,000 civil servants marched on the Capitol and in a symbolic gesture retook their oaths as public servants. Petitions were delivered to senators and members of the U.S. House by union members in 50 states.

The message was consistent: Freezing federal salaries, cutting benefits and shrinking the workforce will not balance the federal budget. Such moves will hurt low-paid civil servants in every member's district. Service will worsen.

"We're trying to raise the consciousness of the taxpayer as to what feds really do," said Patty Viers, president of Local 1148 in Columbus, Ohio, which represents 4,200 Defense workers in support roles. "We are not

getting rich on taxpayers' backs."

Among the biggest battles the union is fighting is what it calls the myth that federal workers are overpaid and don't work hard. Like any company, the bureaucracy has bad eggs, they say. But it is not monolithic. Viers' members make between \$35,000 and \$45,000, she said - and that's after years of service.

"It used to be that going to work for the federal government was a secure thing," said Jimmie Wattle, an accounting technician from Ohio and local union representative for Defense Department payroll workers. "I represent folks who make \$34,000 to \$45,000. Most of them, if they have a family, can't afford to buy health insurance."

The mood at the Hyatt Regency on New Jersey Avenue was somber, but not resigned. Carolyn Federoff, an attorney with the

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Department of Housing and Urban Development in Boston, met with Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) on Tuesday and called her a "proponent of federal service."

"I told her that people will better be able to accept sacrifices if they don't have to be beaten down in the process," Federoff said.

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