

Republicans launch new tactic in latest attack on federal unions

By Joe Davidson | Columnist March 8

Newly emboldened congressional Republicans are taking a novel approach to their longtime efforts to undermine federal employee unions.

Official time, which allows labor leaders a limited range of activities while being paid by the government, has been a favorite target. Rather than trying to outlaw it directly, the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee on Wednesday will consider a new tactic — legislation that would provide a strong deterrent by hitting the retirement benefits of many who use official time.

The intent is the same — weakening it and the unions.

The bill introduced Monday by Rep. Jody Hice (R-Ga.) would prohibit “employees who spend the majority of their time on official time from counting that time as creditable service” toward retirement, according to a document provided by the committee.

Hice did not respond to a request for comment, but when he announced plans for the legislation in January, he cast it as keeping with President Trump’s promise “to take back control of the People’s government.”

With Trump in the White House, Republicans have a better chance of winning on this and other measures affecting the people who operate the government.

“When I came to office, I was shocked to learn that there are thousands of federal employees collecting paychecks — paid by the American taxpayer — without performing the duties they were hired to do,” Hice added. Official time “essentially allows for employees to perform union activities, which are often political in nature, during the workday on the taxpayer’s dime.”

But union political activities are not allowed. The permitted activities benefit an agency's workforce generally, not just union members. In fact, official time is part of a deal that requires unions to represent everyone in a bargaining unit, whether they are union members or not. Management, nonunion workers and agencies also benefit, because official time covers employee participation in labor management forums that promote issues such as improved productivity.

Hice's bill "would set a terrible precedent," said Rep. Elijah E. Cummings (Md.), the top Democrat on the committee. Republicans want "to strip the pensions of one group of employees they do not like: union members."

Federal unions and their Democratic allies in Congress are preparing for a protracted fight on several fronts to protect federal employees. The official-time battle is just one round.

"Official time is not used for union business," Alethea Predeoux, an American Federation of Government Employees legislative representative, said in a letter to Cummings and committee Chairman Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah). "Current law prohibits that, and our union adheres scrupulously to that law. Federal employees conduct official agency business while on official time. ... The law limits official time to that which the union and the agency both agree is reasonable, necessary, and in the public interest. Therefore, agency officials are able to oversee the use, management, and scheduling of official time based on the immediate needs of the workplace."

Tony Reardon, president of the National Treasury Employees Union, defended official time, saying it "is a means of improving the workplace and work processes. By statute, official time can be used to perform certain activities that are in the joint interest of the union and the agency including meetings called by management, negotiating collective bargaining agreements, and participating in labor-management forums and committees. ... Official time is used, for example, for labor and management working groups to implement new workplace initiatives designed to enhance service to the public, to improve work processes and to address workplace safety concerns."


If this bill passes, official time will be used a lot less.

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Columnist Joe Davidson covers the federal government in the Federal Insider. It replaced the Federal Diary, which focused on federal employees. Davidson previously was an assistant city editor at The Washington Post and a Washington and foreign correspondent with The Wall Street Journal, where he covered federal agencies and political campaigns.  Follow @JoeDavidsonWP