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EPA's House Out of Order

For nearly 11 years, occupants of the White House have, in not so many words, told the Environmental Protection Agency not to do its job too well. That anti-environment bias has decimated the ranks of concerned scientists in the EPA. Those who are left find themselves pitted against their bosses in a fight to force the agency to live up to its name.

Now the EPA management is leaning on one of the last strongholds of protest—the vocal union representing white-collar EPA workers. Management is trying to curtail the amount of work time union members can spend on union business and has ordered leaders not to use agency time to talk to Congress, the public or the press.

The EPA union, Local 2050 of the National Federation of Federal Employees, made a name for itself in 1988 when it protested an environmental hazard close to home—the air quality in the EPA headquarters building here. Perhaps as many as 20 percent of the 5,500 workers in the building suffered an adverse reaction to something in the air. Some even required medical treatment. The EPA improved the ventilation, banned smoking and replaced carpeting, wall and floorboards that were thought to be emitting offensive chemicals.

EPA management now plays down the problems with the building, but the union is not convinced. There are still 47 people who do their EPA work at home because they cannot tolerate the air in the building. Twenty people have filed a \$45 million lawsuit against the owner of the building, who leases it to the government.

The episode at EPA headquarters helped to make

a national issue out of indoor air quality, and the union has continued to lobby for changes not only in its own building but also across the country. The question now is: Does that and other pro-environment activities by the union constitute union business?

The Civil Service Reform Act allows federal employee union leaders to do union business during the workday. But EPA lawyers say the union there is representing the interests of private environmental groups and calling it union business. It sounds to us like everyone's business. The union has continued to deal with outside environmental groups seeking indoor air quality reforms, has pushed for tough peer review of EPA scientific research, has questioned the amount of fluoride allowed in drinking water and this week testified before Congress on the indoor air bill. The EPA doesn't think the union always has the scientific data to prove its points.

Union president Dwight Welch was moved to a backwater job in the agency when he became too adamant about the need to put "flammable" warnings on indoor pesticide foggers.

Earlier this year, the EPA brought in an outside consultant to give management a course in how to deal with union members. One source familiar with the course said it was "delivered with a rabid anti-union message."

Management and union members describe each other in very harsh terms, and there is no love lost between the two groups. That isn't unusual in employee-management relations. But in this case, it looks like the employees are trying to do the job that the public expects out of the EPA.

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Editor