

Big Labor's VA Choke Hold

How Democrats put their union allies before the well-being of veterans.

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May 29, 2014 7:08 p.m. ET

We know with certainty that there is at least one person the Department of Veterans Affairs is serving well. That would be the president of local lodge 1798 of the National Federation of Federal Employees.

The Federal Labor Relations Authority, the agency that mediates federal labor disputes, earlier this month ruled in favor of this union president, in a dispute over whether she need bother to show up at her workplace—the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Martinsburg, W.Va. According to FLRA documents, this particular VA employee is 100% "official time"—D.C. parlance for federal employees who work every hour of every work day for their union, at the taxpayer's expense.

In April 2012, this, ahem, VA "employee" broke her ankle and declared that she now wanted to do her nonwork for the VA entirely from the comfort of her home. Veterans Affairs attempted a compromise: Perhaps she could, pretty please, come in two days a week? She refused, and complained to the FLRA that the VA was interfering with her right to act as a union official. The VA failed to respond to the complaint in the required time (perhaps too busy caring for actual veterans) and so the union boss summarily won her case.

The VA battle is only just starting, but any real reform inevitably ends with a fight over organized labor. Think of it as the federal version of Wisconsin, Indiana, Michigan and other states where elected officials have attempted to rein in the public-sector unions that have hijacked government agencies for their own purpose. Fixing the VA requires first breaking labor's grip, and the unions are already girding for that fight.

Federal labor unions are generally weak by comparison to state public-sector unions, though the VA might be an exception. The VA boasts one of the largest federal workforces and VA Secretary Eric Shinseki bragged in 2010 that two-thirds of it is unionized. That's a whopping 200,000 union members, represented by the likes of the American Federation of Government Employees and the Service Employees International Union. And this is government-run health care—something unions know a lot about from organizing health workers in the private sector. Compared with most D.C. unions (which organize for better parking spots) the VA houses a serious union shop.

The Bush administration worked to keep federal union excesses in check; Obama administration officials have viewed contract "negotiations" as a way to reward union allies. Federal unions can't bargain for wages or benefits, but the White House has made it up to them.

Manhattan Institute scholar Diana Furchtgott-Roth recently detailed Office of Personnel Management numbers obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request by Rep. Phil Gingrey (R., Ga.). On May 25, Ms. Furchtgott-Roth reported on MarketWatch that the VA in 2012 paid 258 employees to be 100% "full-time," receiving full pay and benefits to do only union work. Seventeen had six-figure salaries, up to \$132,000. According to the Office of Personnel Management, the VA paid for 988,000 hours of "official" time in fiscal 2011, a 23% increase from 2010.

Moreover, as Sens. Rob Portman (R., Ohio) and Tom Coburn (R., Okla.) noted in a 2013 letter to Mr. Shinseki, the vast majority of these "official" timers were nurses, instrument technicians pharmacists, dental assistants and therapists, who were being paid to do union work even as the VA tried to fill hundreds of jobs and paid overtime to other staff.

As for patient-case backlogs, the unions have helped in their creation. Contract-negotiated work rules over job classifications and duties and seniorities are central to the "bureaucracy" that fails veterans. More damaging has been the union hostility to any VA attempt to give veterans access to alternative sources of care—which the unions consider a direct job threat. The American Federation of Government Employees puts out regular press releases blasting any "outsourcing" of VA work to non-VA-union members.

The VA scandal is now putting an excruciating spotlight on the most politically sensitive agency in D.C., and the unions are worried about where this is headed. They watched in alarm as an overwhelming 390 House members—including 160 Democrats—voted on May 21 to give the VA more power to fire senior executives, a shot over the rank-and-file's bow. They watched in greater alarm as Mr. Shinseki said the VA would be letting more veterans seek care at private facilities in areas where the department's capacity is limited.

This is a first step toward a reform being drafted by Sens. Coburn, John McCain (R., Ariz.) and Richard Burr (R., N.C.), which would give veterans a card allowing them health services at facilities of their choosing. The union fear is that Democrats, in a tough election year, will be pressured toward reforms that break labor's VA stronghold.

Not surprisingly, Sen. Bernie Sanders (D., Vt.), chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee, has promised his own "reform." Odds are it will echo the unions' call to simply throw more money at the problem. Any such bill should be viewed as Democrats once again putting the interests of their union allies ahead of veterans.