

The LABOR Paper

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Federal Mediation & Conciliation Services hit with major cuts

FMCS has been effectively shut down

by Peter List, laborunionnews.com

President Donald Trump's downsizing of the federal government has hit the Federal Mediation & Conciliation Service (FMCS)—an agency that is largely unknown to the general public but well known to unions and labor relations practitioners—effectively shutting it down.

"The Federal Mediation & Conciliation Service is terminating most of its employees and services by the end of the day Wednesday," reported the Federal News Network Wednesday afternoon.

The FMCS is an independent agency primarily known for offering assistance to employers and unions with collective bargaining, as well as identifying arbitrators or arbitration panels for employers and unions that cannot resolve grievances.

"In fiscal 2024," the Federal

News Network reported, "the agency conducted over 5,400 mediated negotiations and provided more than 10,000 arbitration panels to settle labor disputes."

FMCS is a 230-employee agency that exists to serve as a voluntary mediator between unions and businesses. As an "independent agency," its director nominally reports to the president, but the agency is so small that in effect, there is no oversight at all — and it showed, becoming a real-life caricature of all the excesses that the Department of Government Efficiency has alleged take place in government.

Though the Trump administration will keep "a small D.C. headquarters team to continue what the administration considers to be the statutorily mandated services," an employee told the **Federal News Network**, with FMCS mostly closed, employers and unions who wish to use mediation or arbitration services, as many do, will likely turn to the American Arbitration Association to fill the void.

Workers Memorial events scheduled

The Bloomington & Normal Trades & Labor Assembly (AFL-CIO) will mark Workers' Memorial Day with a commemorative service at 6 a.m. on Monday, April 28, at White Oak Park, 1514 Cottage Avenue in Bloomington. The next evening, April 29, is a panel discussion in conjunction with the "Deadly Deception: Asbestos in McLean County" exhibit. In Peoria, the Workers Memorial Day event will be held at Peoria City Hall, 419 Fulton, on Monday, April 28 at 5:30 p.m.

Jason Emerick with Ironworkers Local 112 will be one of the featured speakers. This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Mc Cluggage Bridge accident that took the lives of Robert Foulks, John Irby and Ronald Watson.

In Galesburg, the Workers Memorial event will be held on Monday, April 28 at the Trades and Labor Office, 1640 N. Henderson Street in Galesburg beginning at 5:30 p.m. Additional information will be updated as available.



PEORIA -- The USPS workers and other union members held a rally on March 23 to say NO to privatization of the Postal Service. See the 4/17 issue of The Labor Paper for more pictures and a story



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Check out the new website by the National AFL-CIO, the Department of People Who Work for a Living.

We'll be ensuring the federal government works for working people and isn't destroyed by billionaires like Elon Musk. We'll report on the facts of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) cuts and what you can do to fight back.

<https://deptofpeoplewhowork.org>

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Government cuts hit home for town of Ottawa

by Mark Gruenberg, PAI Staff Writer

OTTAWA, Ill. (PAI)—The battles in court, in Congress and even in street protests over the slashing and burning of federal government people, programs and priorities may seem very far away to people on the street—until they hit home in cities like Ottawa, Ill.

Ottawa is the county seat of LaSalle County. It's 46 miles west of Joliet, 83 miles from Chicago and 74 miles from Peoria. And though Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris carried Illinois by 53%-43%, her Republican foe, Donald Trump, carried LaSalle County with 30,717 votes (58%) to 21,029 (40%) for Harris and 751 for other candidates.

That's a pattern elsewhere in the U.S., and has been for decades. One longtime Mine Workers leader from Southwestern Virginia, looking at the map of the U.S. after the 2016 Trump-Clinton election, told *Press Associates Union News Service* that he saw a sea of red starting south of Richmond and stretching across the entire South, Southwest and Plains States.

Harris carried 451 of the nation's most-populous counties, including all of those in metro Chicago and its suburbs, plus New York and its northern suburbs and Los Angeles and its suburbs. Trump carried Long Island's two populous counties, plus Fort Worth, Texas--and the other 2660 counties, most of them thinly populated or rural.

All those rural counties will get hurt by looming cuts in federal aid to local public schools, the ending of school lunch programs, pending cuts to Medicaid and the like. But LaSalle County in general and Ottawa in particular has one big extra problem which makes it vulnerable.

It's a superfund site, a 17-acre Superfund site, right off the Fox River and U.S. 6.

Remember the book and the 2018 movie *The Radium Girls*? The story was told both ways several years ago and in a play now running in Los Angeles. Radium watches—watches that glowed in the dark—were all the rage, decades ago. The glow came from

contaminated with radon. Soil samples, collected from the landfilled areas, were found to have elevated levels of the radioactive contaminant radium-226." Areas were fenced off. At least one home was physically moved because soil under it was too "hot."

The radium watch factory is long gone, and pieces of it—also infected with radium—were buried in 16 sites all over Ottawa. Fifteen have been cleaned up, EPA records show, and 32,000 cubic yards of radioactive soils and debris were shipped to a secure storage site in rural Utah.

But the old radium factory site itself, now a fenced-off landfill, hasn't been cleaned up. It has 140,000 cubic yards of radium-contaminated soil and EPA says to clean it up, workers will have to toil ten feet deep. Only when all that contamination is removed can the site be restored.

Under a schedule the EPA's Superfund section posted, that last cleanup was supposed to start by last September 30, at a cost of \$90 million, and last for four years. The money came from the Biden administration's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. But work hasn't begun yet. Now it won't.

Local union leaders—including one recently retired state legislator—say it's been cut off by Donald Trump's EPA.

Trump's agency administrator, Lee Zeldin, is not only firing most of the agency's headquarters workers, but he's cut off grant money for

such projects as Superfund cleanups. Before the cutoff of the Ottawa project, the Superfund cleanup total was scheduled to be \$1 billion in Biden's law for 22 sites nationwide. There is no list on EPA's website of which Superfund cleanup grants were yanked,

The contractor for the Ottawa cleanup is a non-union firm headquartered in Georgia, with a Chicago office. The Biden law providing the money gave priority to unionized companies for its projects. But the Ottawa cleanup began more than a decade ago, so it apparently escaped that requirement.

"The bid" to clean up the factory site "went to a non-union contractor whose bid was \$20 million below the lowest union bid,"

Ottawa

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The Radium Girls statue: W Jefferson St & Clinton St, Ottawa, IL 61350

radium, a radioactive element, painted on the watch faces by young women, aged 18-20, in a plant in Ottawa, Ill.

Between applications on the watches from the 1920s through 1978, the girls licked the paintbrushes clean before loading them up with radium again and painting more watch dials. They ingested the radium. Victims suffered from "disintegrating jaws, horrible pain in their bones, death from hemorrhages and massive sarcomas"—cancers—"that riddled their bodies," Wikipedia says, summarizing the book and the movie.

When the Illinois factory, which was later used as a high school, was eventually demolished, "Surface and subsurface soils in various areas of Ottawa were contaminated with radioactive wastes," the Environmental Protection Agency's official report about the site says.

"Some buildings in the Ottawa area are

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says Dan Mercer, President of the Illinois Valley Central Labor Council. “They started setting up” the site “but no work is being done. We called Sen. Dick Durbin’s office to make sure they were doing something.”

The Labor Department’s Office of Federal Contracts Compliance Policy is involved, too. It’s supposed to oversee federal contractors and ensure they don’t violate civil rights and equal employment opportunity laws.

Or it was. Trump minions issued a rule days after he took office this year and sent it to all federal agencies, removing the federal acquisition (procurement) rule banning discrimination on the basis of race, sex, gender, religion or other factors, Brent Barron, president of American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) Local 648, told Press Associates Union News Service.

Barron, who is also president of the union’s National Council of Field Labor Locals, and who lives in Chicago’s south suburbs, says one big but unnoticed change affected one sentence in the rules.

That sentence now specifically says pro-

curement officers don’t have to take a contractor’s record on racial, sexual, religious, gender or other discrimination into account in deciding if it gets federal work.

In other words, the change legalizes discrimination.

It also left the Labor Department’s Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs to monitor all those contractors. There are 1,000 in California alone and another 800-900 in Texas, says Barron.

And that’s where Trump’s puppeteer, multibillionaire Elon Musk and his supposed “Department of Government Efficiency” (DOGE), comprised of 22-year-old computer nerds, enters the picture of peril, Barron adds. Putting it bluntly, DOGE’s planned slashes in the small agency are so severe that it would be incapable of overseeing very much.

“We’re talking of billions of dollars in government contracts,” he says. “Everything from a McDonald’s at a military base to janitorial services in federal buildings” to the Ottawa Superfund site.

The Chicago regional office of the OFC-CP oversees contractors in Ohio, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Indiana, Illinois and 11 other states stretching westwards. It had 50-60 federal workers there and in sub-regional offices in Indianapolis, Milwaukee and Minneapolis. Now the regional office will have one chief, three deputies and five investigators, total.

“They supposedly got fully funded under the continuing resolution,” the temporary money bills Congress approved to keep the government going through the end of this fiscal year on September 30, says Barron. “But at some point, we expect they’ll imple-

ment the RIFs (reductions in force)” Musk and DOGE mandate. “That’s what’s coming for those who haven’t resigned already.”

The agency overall has—or had—800 workers to cover the whole country, Barron explains. Now it’ll be cut in half. But OFC-CP still must oversee the contractors’ compliance, or lack of it, with civil rights laws. “It’s already taking 175 years to get to each workplace.”

There’s one other problem with such cuts, at least in Illinois, and probably in other states, too, Barron warns. Not only is Musk out to line his own pockets—and those of the corporate class—by cutting government workers and programs, but there will be nothing and nobody to stop outright graft.

“Somebody comes in” for a project like the Ottawa cleanup “and hires their friends,” Barron says. “I’ll put you on the payroll for \$100,000 and you kick back \$50,000 to me.”

But the ultimate aim is even more sinister, he warns.

“The gist of this is to make agencies no longer functional” by stripping them of workers and dollars. “So the American people would then say ‘Why do we need an EPA, an OSHA, and so on?’”

Which is a longtime right-wing goal. Grover Norquist, a radical right big wheel and head of the so-called “Americans For Tax Reform,” a lobby which opposes any and all tax increases and makes Republicans sign “no taxes” oaths, put it succinctly, 24 years ago:

“I don’t want to abolish government. I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub.”



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