

## **Union must stop voter registration drives in federal offices**

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The American Federation of Government Employees may not conduct voter registration drives in federal workplaces, the Office of Special Counsel has ruled.

In a letter to AFGE General Counsel Mark Roth Tuesday, OSC Associate Special Counsel for Investigation and Prosecution William E. Reukauf, said that although AFGE has not yet endorsed a presidential candidate, "AFGE has become identified with the success or failure of candidates in partisan elections. The evidence that we have obtained... has led us to conclude that, in the current election cycle, AFGE has become identified publicly and repeatedly with the failure of a presidential candidate, namely, George W. Bush."

Under OSC regulations, partisan organizations may not conduct voter registration drives on federal property.

Roth blasted the decision, calling it evidence that OSC has become politicized and is trying to prevent federal employees from registering to vote. "This opinion is total nonsense," he said. "This agency should be embarrassed."

The OSC is charged with overseeing federal employee compliance with the Hatch Act, 1939 legislation that bars federal employees from engaging in political activity while at work, or while using federal resources.

In the past, Roth said, AFGE has conducted voter registration drives up to the point where the union makes a formal endorsement in the presidential race. The new OSC opinion, he said, represents an expansion of earlier restrictions. But OSC spokeswoman Catherine Deeds said the letter was merely a restatement of existing OSC policy dating to 1984. She said an endorsement has always only been one of several factors that the OSC considers in determining whether or not an organization is partisan.

To reach the conclusion, OSC attorneys reviewed material on AFGE's Web site, public statements of leadership, and its union magazine. In the January/February issue of *The Government Standard*, the OSC letter notes, AFGE President John Gage "makes comments about Congress being 'led by rogue Republicans,' and about '[t]he administration's brass knuckle tactics,' and states that, '[i]t is particularly disgusting now to recall how this administration repeatedly raised the red, white and blue to justify their actions when, in hindsight, it has become so clear that the only color they really care about is green.'" Gage goes on to say, "We are targeted as a big, red bull's-eye by this administration," according to the letter.

The OSC, it was noted, is investigating three AFGE officials for Hatch Act violations. One AFGE official allegedly circulated a union newsletter in a federal workplace that read: "Protect yourself and your country: Vote George Bush out of office!" Another AFGE official told federal

employees at an orientation program that "the only way to stop this administration and keep government employees' jobs safe is to vote Democratic in the upcoming election." In a third incident, an AFGE official has been accused of sending a satiric e-mail to federal workers purporting to be President Bush's résumé, indicating that the president is incompetent and guilty of malfeasance.

Roth said AFGE also was critical of President Clinton, suing his administration more than 30 times over government downsizing plans and other matters.

Union workers assigned to AFGE's voter registration drives are instructed not to encourage workers to vote for any particular candidate, he said. "With this administration, we don't have to do a damn thing," he said. "Employees know what they are doing to the civil service system."

Roth added that the union will ignore the OSC letter and will continue to ask agencies to use federal workplaces to conduct registration drives. AFGE will sue any agencies that refuse in federal district court, he said.