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U.S. HOUSE

Delay of defense personnel system rejected

- Reps. Jay Inslee and Norm Dicks vow to continue the fight.

By Chris Barron, Sun Staff

The House refused Tuesday to delay a controversial new civilian defense personnel system that will affect more than 10,000 West Sound workers.

An amendment that would have delayed the implementation was introduced by Rep. Jay Inslee, D-Bainbridge Island.

Despite the defeat, Inslee and Rep. Norm Dicks, D-Belfair, said they will continue to fight against the Defense Department system. They say the system will strip basic rights from the more than 10,000 civilian defense workers in West Sound.

The amendment that failed would have become part of the House defense appropriations bill. After the amendment was killed, the House passed the rest of the bill, which will send \$523 million to West Sound for Navy and private sector projects and military pay raises.

The personnel system amendment, co-sponsored by Inslee, failed by a partisan vote of 218-202. Just four House Republicans voted for the amendment that would have required further study of the personnel system.

"Obviously, I feel very strongly that the folks who are working hard to keep our defense system on track were not treated well by the majority party today," Inslee said following the vote.

"This is unhealthy for the war effort. We need to maintain the morale of those keeping these ships running."

Defense labor unions have rallied strongly against the new defense personnel system, saying workers could lose such rights as local collective bargaining and whistleblower protection. It also could mean elimination of the 15-grade pay system, instead linking pay to performance.

Unions have conducted rallies across the country, including one in Bremerton in April to educate civilian defense workers about the personnel system.

Rick Williams, president of the Bremerton Metal Trades Council, the largest shipyard labor organization, said that although he was disappointed by the defeat, the fight is not over.

"We've brought this to the forefront where everybody knows exactly what they'll lose if this thing goes through," he said. "People are still fighting against this, and we won't stop until it's done."

The Pentagon, which has tasked the Navy to implement the system over the next few years, has offered few specifics on what the system will include. And that's drawn the biggest concern from those who oppose it.

"What we're saying is take a year, take a timeout, and let's adopt the adage 'trust but verify,'" said Rep. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., who co-sponsored the amendment with Inslee.

"Let's give the administration an opportunity to come before the Congress and show us exactly the rules they want rather than giving them a blank check in advance."

Dicks, who spoke in favor of the Inslee amendment Tuesday, said he will continue to pursue a measure that would exempt the nation's four naval shipyards from the personnel system.

"There's some interest in that, and I'll raise that in conference (with the Senate)," he said.

Inslee said he will try to insert elements of his amendment into the defense bill when it's debated in conference with the House and Senate.

Navy Secretary Gordon England was given the lead by the Pentagon to create the new personnel system.

England said the system will be phased in through 2006, with the first group of defense workers being placed into a six-month pilot system this summer. A 12-month pilot system will follow. By the start of 2007, more than 300,000 defense workers will be included in the system.

At that point, the Pentagon must receive approval from the Office of Personnel Management to include the remaining 400,000 defense workers in the program.

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