



The Ledger

Opinion

Editorial: Per Ross, let's make officials report all 'official' time

By The Editorial Board

Posted May 22, 2018 at 12:01 AM

Updated May 22, 2018 at 12:08 AM

Think unions and the stereotype that comes to mind is one of burly, thick-necked guys clad in hard hats, scuffed work boots and plenty of denim.

Perhaps that image was fit in 1955, when the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial

Organizations merged to form the AFL-CIO, America's largest organized labor group. At the time an estimated 35 percent of U.S. workers belonged to a union, and most often such workers drove trucks, assembled cars, built and wired buildings, or engaged in similar hands-dirtying work.

Today, only 11 percent of workers are unionized, and frequently they wear a uniform (such as police or firefighter), or work in an office or public school classroom. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 34 percent of union workers toil for local, state, or federal government agencies — or roughly five times the number of those

who drive trucks, assemble cars, build and wire buildings, or engage in similar hands-dirtying work.

Inevitably, these workers must tend to union business at the expense of their official duties in service to the public.

U.S. Rep. Dennis Ross is particularly concerned about how such juggling among federal civil servants affects taxpayers, and seeks to enlighten the public, and perhaps the rest of the U.S. government, about how many taxpayers' dimes are consumed by union time.

Ross is eyeing a federal law that says managers must allot staffers time — known in government jargon as “official time” — to perform union activities,

insofar as it remains “consistent with the requirements of an effective and efficient government.”

The federal Office of Personnel Management reported last month that most union workers who tap official time spend it lobbying Congress about legislation that affects federal union employees (for instance, bills related to federal pay and benefits); representing union employees who face discipline or who filed grievances; and participating in labor-management “workgroups.”

Certain federal employees, under law, are paid to spend 100 percent of their time on union functions. Or some union

reps establish “banks” of paid time that they draw down in working just for the union.

The OPM report found that between 2010 and 2016, the most recent year available, the hours spent on official time jumped nearly 17 percent, from 3.1 million hours to 3.61 million.

In some cases, official time was negligible. The Federal Election Commission, for example, reported just six hours of official time in 2016. In other cases, it was considerable. The Defense Department recorded almost 387,000 hours of official time that year.

The size, scope and mission of a particular agency will drive much of that.

Still, in the aggregate, this is no small expense. The OPM notes that in 2016 official time cost taxpayers almost \$175 million, up roughly 8 percent from 2014, the last time the survey was done.

And the report doesn't catch everything. The OPM said its report was limited to payroll costs because it lacks a "comprehensive data source" that would allow for "a complete accounting of the costs of union activities." Thus, its analysis does not include taxpayers' costs for facilities, equipment and travel related to collective bargaining.

The OPM knew, for example, that the Social Security Administration in 2016 spent \$2.1 million on union reps' travel, office space, telephones and supplies only because the agency was required to report that to its congressional oversight committee.

Congressman Ross seeks to fix that.

In May 2017, the Lakeland Republican, noting inconsistencies and lags in data-gathering on these costs, filed a bill that would require all federal agencies to provide Congress detailed annual reports of official time expenses.

“With greater transparency, employees will be less likely to abuse the system, which will result in less waste of

taxpayer dollars,” Ross said at the time. “It is far past time we require agencies to provide this information to Congress and the public. Taxpayers deserve clear, reliable data on how many employees are performing union work on official time in lieu of their regularly assigned government duties.”

He’s right. His bill passed the House, but unfortunately stalled in the Senate. Ross’ office told us Monday he will seek to have the measure added to the National Defense Authorization Act, the must-pass defense spending bill that the House will take up later this week.

Ross will soon retire, but we encourage him to pursue this bill until he leaves. Moreover, we urge the rest of Congress

to heed his point.

Congress owes taxpayers a full accounting of time spent by staffers promoting the personal career interests of the nearly 1 million unionized federal workers, and how that squares with the commitment, under law, of providing “effective and efficient” government.