

# The Washington Post

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## FEDERAL DIARY ◇ Stephen Barr

### *Blunt Talk on Union Web Site Spotlights Frustration Over Labor Relations Changes*

The president of the Metal Trades Department, AFL-CIO, describes himself as "a very plain-spoken person."

**Ron Ault** isn't kidding, either.

Here's what Ault told his union activists about the Pentagon's plan to overhaul workplace rules for the civil service and for unions:

"Our job is to be the irritant, piss ant stinging them on their ankles at every opportunity."

Actually, Ault expects more from his union activists.

"In your workplace, be creative, be disruptive, be a royal pain in the [expletive]!!"

Actually, Ault thinks the solution is for union members to vote for a new administration and replace Defense Secretary **Donald H. Rumsfeld**, Navy Secretary **Gordon R. England** and Kay **Coles James**, director of the Office of Personnel Management.

"All these neoconservative fascists gotta go!"

Actually, Ault explains, this is what happens in the Internet age. He wrote the exhortations in an "internal e-mail that was never supposed to see the light of day." But the Metal Trades webmaster picked it up and posted his commentary for all to see last month.

Ault, of course, is standing by his words. "I'm not backing off of them. . . . I said what I said."

Actually, Ault added, he might have said it a little differently.

"If I was going to do that in a bigger crowd, I would have probably used different words. . . . I would probably have used less inflammatory words. But it doesn't change the fact that they are neoconservatives. . . .It's all political."

Ault's bluntness provides a glimpse of the frustrations inside federal unions. Following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Congress decided to give broad leeway to the departments of Defense and Homeland Security in civil service matters.

Bush administration officials argued to Congress that the times require a more flexible system that gives agencies more discretion in setting pay, judging performance and assigning jobs. In public forums, administration officials made it clear they were tired of second-

guessing by unions.

Democrats and federal unions fought a delaying action, but the 2002 midterm elections put Republicans in control of the Senate. The White House got legislation that permits an overhaul of labor relations at the two departments.

For the past few months, the departments have been talking with unions about creating a more streamlined labor-management system. Unions may lose some of their clout in the two departments when regulations are published this year.

Ault contends that the White House never "clearly defined what was broken and needed to be fixed" and believes that consultations between unions and the departments, as directed by Congress, are a poor substitute for negotiations that lead to contractual agreements.

At the Pentagon, Ault said, "there hasn't been any trust across the table, and to do something this broad and sweeping without building some trust is impossible."

**Joyce K. Frank**, spokeswoman for the project office launching the new Defense civil service system, said, "We recognize there will be areas of disagreement" but said future meetings offer opportunities for "meaningful dialogue."

The department, she said, has "every confidence" in the "work ethic and patriotism" of Metal Trades employees.

On his Web site this month, Ault has posted another message to members of the Metal Trades union, which represents about 46,000 Defense employees at naval shipyards and other installations.

He acknowledged hearing criticism "that I am unnecessarily confrontational, use inflammatory terms that aren't helpful to the process and am an 'obstructionist.'"

Ault asserted that "nothing we do is being given real consideration. The management teams are simply going through the motions. . . ."

Actually, Ault concluded, "all of this is going to end up being decided in federal courts, so as I see it we gain nothing by being led quietly to slaughter, talking nice and being polite."

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