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CHAPTER 279

CINCINNATI, OH; ERLANGER, KY; AND EDISON, NJ

Honorable Scott Pruitt, Administrator  
US Environmental Protection Agency Headquarters  
William Jefferson Clinton Building  
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20460

Michael E. Ottlinger, PhD, DABT  
President, NTEU Chapter 279  
AWBERC Laboratory Building  
26 West Martin Luther King Drive,  
Cincinnati, OH 45268

12 May 2017

Dear Administrator Pruitt,

In my representational capacity as President of Chapter 279 of the National Treasury Employees Union (NTEU) of bargaining unit employees at U. S. EPA in the Cincinnati, OH; Edison, NJ; and Erlanger, KY, locations, I have some thoughts and concerns that I would like share with you in the best interests of "our" federal employees, the Agency, as well as the Civil Service System itself of which we are all a part.

Firstly, I hope we will stay mindful of our status as Civil Servants and of our obligations within the Civil Service System and our pride in serving our country. The Civil Service System is an essential element of our government, particularly the Executive Branch where the greatest number of us reside. This has been my constant refrain which I have shared with all my union colleagues; Representatives Chaffetz and Cummings on the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform; my own House Member, the Honorable Brad Wenstrup; as well as employees and senior leadership within the Agency. I feel compelled to do so with you because I believe this is a preeminent consideration. The Civil Service System is indispensable and whatever words and deeds are taken which may affect the careers and working conditions of federal employees should be designed to maintain and improve upon what has been an honorable and effective institution of our government.

In my role here in Cincinnati, I make it my personal practice to avoid any political activities, almost always including expressions of my own personal opinions on such subjects. Truth be told, my bargaining unit has no uniform political opinion. Our workforce is not politically or otherwise monolithic. Their views are diverse as the state of Ohio or the country.

As an example, while I abstain from expressing any personal opinions on the touchy subject of Global Warming, I think it is important to consider that many of our employees were hired by the previous administration precisely because they had such backgrounds and interests. In fact, the prior administration directed, encouraged, nurtured, and rewarded the same employees with just as legitimate and equal a right to do so under the mandate granted to them as this administration possesses now. To whatever extent this research, outreach activities, or other scientific involvements, may now be displaced among our current priorities, these are employees hired on the basis of objective qualifications to do specific work as assigned by the Agency. That's what federal employees do. The whipsaw effect on them is difficult and I hope you will proceed in such a manner as would project an understanding and appreciation of their dilemma. And when you speak of them in public, I hope your words as the leader of this Agency and workforce will always project respect and appreciation for them.

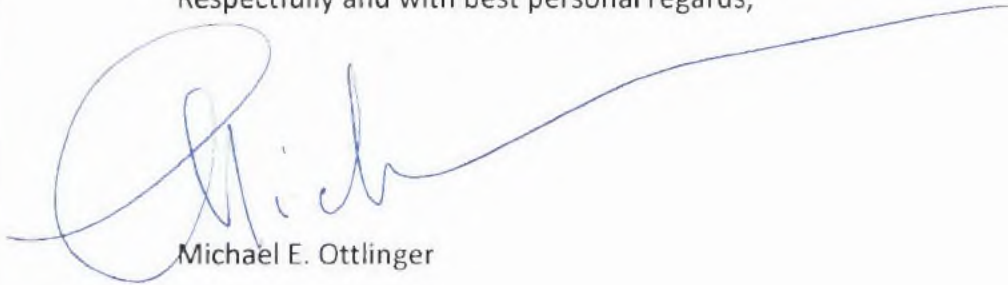
As Messrs. Chaffetz and Cummings have noted at the outset of their public hearings, the improper conduct of a very small number of persons does not represent the majority of EPA employees nor the federal workforce. I would ask you to reflect on how very embarrassing these experiences have been for the majority of our workforce who certainly do not comport themselves in such a manner and would never have committed such misconduct. They now suffer because the pervasive political discourse refers not only to these culprits themselves but instead casts shame on the Agency and federal employees as a whole. Please contemplate how grossly unfair it is to those persons who suffered the sexual harassment of Peter Jutro to now in some measure share the blame for his crimes. Two humiliations, one at his hands, one at the hands of intemperate and irresponsible public figures.

Additionally, as you and your colleagues within the administration provide feedback to Congress and the White House on matters impacting federal employees, I hope you will be sensitive to actions proposed which may be harmful to their careers and families, including such things as pay and retirement benefits. Decisions impacting the Civil Service System need to be made in full consideration of that system's role in our government. If anything, opening a constructive and meaningful discussion of how to strengthen and improve the Civil Service System is what is truly called for. And, that discussion must ensure that the Civil Service System is kept as a professional service and held apart from political considerations or retaliations. I look forward to the day, hopefully hastened on by your leadership, when federal employees may again be appropriately recognized for their service and feel pride in their positions of trust within that system.

While we may not share the same sympathies on this subject, I would also like to make a case for unions. It has been my experience, and that of my family going back at least three generations, that without unions employees would lack a necessary voice and, perhaps in some instances, not receive the due process that they are guaranteed and deserve. Unions, and most emphatically, the Union Management Partnerships in this Agency, have made a tangible contribution to its efficiency and to better workplace relations. I hope that you will keep an open mind to this. And, that you will be willing, however strained you may on occasion feel yourself to be, make an effort to reach out and work with us in a fair and open manner.

Lastly, after everything this Agency and its employees have been through over the past several years, I would entreat you to do your utmost to return our internal atmosphere to a condition closer to normalcy. Moving forward, we need to lessen the apprehensions of our employees and redirect all of our energies towards more encouraging and productive venues. I will look forward to working with you to strive to achieve those ends.

Respectfully and with best personal regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Michael E. Ottlinger", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Michael E. Ottlinger

Michael F. OTTUNGER  
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