

Letters

8/8/00

LANL employees should consider 'unionizing'

Editor:

Morale at Los Alamos National Laboratory has never been lower — ever. One has to ask: What does the future hold for the Lab, depending as it does for its quality on the continuation of a strong record of world-renowned science? Soon after all of our present troubles began (with leaked rumors of the Wen Ho Lee case), we employees found the newly imposed regimen of extra security briefings, rules, and microscopic inspections of laboratory security practices to be very annoying and insulting.

When the so-called "scandal" became a full-blown Congressional witch hunt, there was a palpable shudder of apprehension at the possibility that the U.S. Department of Energy and the FBI would administer polygraph examinations, with their well-known high level of uncertainty. Now, the FBI is running rough-shod over the lab, trampling on the civil rights of employees, without any checks or balances whatsoever. Many employees up and down the halls are talking about retiring or else leaving the lab entirely, and it is getting harder and harder to attract any new ones. In this environment, the number of first-rate scientists interested in even coming to visit is shrinking. A blizzard of mindless restrictions has been dreamed up by Congress in a frenzy and passed down without question by the DOE, and then swiftly and blindly imposed by lab management. Rather than any credible national security breach ever having occurred, these draconian measures are cutting deeply into our real source of national security, namely, the morale of people at LANL and their legacy of 57 years of designing our nuclear defense.

I, like many at Los Alamos, had hoped that someone in the administration, or in Congress, or in the DOE, or in the University of California, or in upper management at the lab, would step boldly forward to save the lab and its employees from this nightmare. But, realistically, there are no white knights that will rush in to save us. The lab management, though they should have acted sooner, are now powerless to stem the black waters flooding around us. It is easy for the workers to blame them, and it is easy for management to fear the worst of workers uniting to protest all these problems.

But a union of LANL employees does not present the usual picture of antagonism: factory bosses locking out factory workers, in order to maximize profits for stockholders. In fact, a union at the lab could indeed help management to present a solid line of defense against the attacks we've seen this last year. Suppose, for example, that lab management, backed up by a united front of employees, all stood firm against polygraphs? Would Congress or the DOE call for mass firings? If so, where would they find ready-made replacements for the lab's world-class scientists, bomb designers, plutonium chemists, and explosives engineers?

We employees must take responsibility for our future, since we are the ones who care most about the issues that directly affect us, namely, the morale and working conditions at the lab; the continuation of the contract with UC; the threats being made by one of the Regents to hand over the UC retirement system to his cronies; or the diversion of raises into other "projects" in the lab (such as "beefing up security"). The time has come for LANL employees to give serious consideration to unionizing the lab.

Brad Lee Holian
4 Camino Cielo Azul,
Santa Fe, NM 87505