

On the afternoon of Friday, May 16th of 2008 the staff of the Puerto Rico National Processing Service Center (PRNPSC) was instructed to take a moment and read a memo that was distributed via email to all the personnel in the building regardless of their rank or function in the center. The email came directly from Branch Chief, Kathy Fields and it addressed the results and consequences of several safety inspections the building had undergone during the previews week.

According to the memo; *“The report identifies a number of deficiencies related to egress in the event of emergency, access for emergency vehicles, fire alarm system deficiencies, security lock functionality as well as fire hazard concerns.”* The letter was discussed briefly and following that, the entire staff was requested to leave the premises in order to comply with the order to cease operations immediately since according to the document, *“... the safety and security of our employees is our top priority”*.

To that end, the entire floor staff of Human Service Specialists (HSS) and several other sections of the NPSC such as custodian positions were placed in what it is known as “administrative leave”. Administrative Leave is a status that allows the employee to remain both active within the system as an employee of the enterprise and in a state of regular payroll. It’s considered “regular payroll” regular time earnings of 40 hours per week not including any special schedule modifications such as overtimes and holidays that might happen if the employees were assisting regularly to the NPSC.

Upon leaving the premises the HSS were reminded the information on the memo paying close attention to the calls that would have to be made to the automated telephone system “OCTEL”. The calls would serve two main objectives; they would give us (via recorded messages) updates on status of the safety issues and dates as per when we would return to full labor as usual. It is also worthy of mention that considerable amounts of people were not present on the 16th of May for various reasons and not everyone was informed by the administration that this had occurred.

During a period of approximately two weeks we were requested to call on a daily basis to check for any updates in schedules or updates in the status of the center. After the 3rd week the messages began to come on the system every certain number of days. Although the actual messages varied in minimal things the recordings addressed the same issue all throughout the 8 week process. “Due to fire hazard and safety regulations, the PRNPSC will continue to be closed until further notice, thank you for your patience.”

Along the course of this time, several employees were contacted and given the chance to travel to states of the union in order to work as field operatives as part of recovery efforts thus making the number of people available in PR a smaller one.

On Sunday the July the 13th the staff was made aware of an “all hands meeting” that would take place at the center itself in which we would be given updates regarding the status of our jobs. The meeting was to take place on Tuesday July the 15th of 2008.

On Tuesday July the 15th, an all staff “all hands meeting” was carried out around 2:00pm that lasted until almost 5:00pm in which the remainder of the staff in PR was present as well as the local administration and Branch Chief, Monty Le Maire.

The purpose of the 3 hour long meeting was to inform the staff of the decision that management had taken in regards to the current status. Instead of addressing the safety issues previously mentioned, the resolution turned out to be a cease and desist of all operations including salary of the personnel of the PRNPSC currently available on the island. Not limited to just us but also extending to those recently deployed working on other states, effective immediately after they are returned from their current assignments.

According to the administration, the HSS and other PRNPSC related employees such as Program Specialists (PS), custodians, supervisors and such, would be moved from their “administrative leave” to a “non pay status” effective immediately. It was made very clear from the beginning that the decision was final and that there was no option to be considered in regards to this situation. However, at no moment during the meeting was a clear and concrete reason given as to why this massive “release” of people was taking place. During the 1st hour the meeting seemed to be steered into the idea that the safety issues were too big to be addressed and that the agency had no option except to let us go. Allegedly this would be a better option rather than invest a massive amount of money into the building in order to take it up to the standards required. Another option suggested by the staff was the possibility of either relocating the center temporarily or maybe even permanently to another facility or building given the fact that the federal government has several structures spread across the island. The administration and Mr. Le Maire turned this, along with a series of other suggestions down stating that the cost of an operation such as those suggested were too high to be considered.

Halfway through the meeting a concern was raised when it was pointed out that this is not the first facility to undergo safety issues

within the enterprise and that the other NPSCs have had their issues addressed in a timely manner and with very good results. At this point Mr. Le Maire introduced a second reason not previously mentioned to us yet directly related to our situation. He stated that the enterprise as a whole was having several issues addressed, one of which was a "*surplus*" of individuals employed, in direct contrast with the number of people required to carry out the job available at this moment. In other words, F.E.M.A. is "overstaffed" on an agency-wide level. What this means to us is that the agency as a unit has to cut down and eliminate this "*surplus*" of employees in order to accommodate and redistribute the workload available in a manner in which it is most efficient.

That said, we as a group that understands the nature of this agency, know that our jobs depend on the available amount of work and on the overall performances of each worker. However, if the agency was undergoing a period of "overstaff", why were we not made aware of this situation before and why are we being forced out of our jobs due to "*safety issues with our facilities*" when "safety" is clearly not the main issue for our current status. When asked about a time frame for repairs it was stated to us that they expect the building to be up to date with all requirements met on August 15th of 2008.

As an odd move, the management made a bold statement when they shared the future plans for the NPSC staff. According to the administration a basic crew of 25 to 30 people will be present at all times in the facility so that it may run on a minimal capacity. This, we found rather odd since it was made clear that we were being released. It was explained to us that in order to treat all of us fairly and to avoid releasing hundreds of people, they decided to make this number of 25 to 30 a skeleton frame that will be filled on rotation by different HSS every two weeks. According to the management and MR. Le Maire, this would allow all the "not quite released personnel" a shot at working, with no one working more than the others. This was insulting when the numbers were broken down and it was evident that to accommodate close to 250 people in batches of 25 every two weeks, would take an HSS at least 4 to 5 months to be given two weeks of work. At this rate most people won't work until the next fiscal year.

However it was made very clear by Mr. Le Maire that even though the building may be ready by said date, we will not be called back to work as before because of the aforementioned "*surplus*". This clearly shows that safety is not the reason for our lack of employment thus making the surplus the only option to be considered.

If that were the case, then we demand an explanation as to what were the criteria to let go of over 250 fully trained employees. After all, if the surplus is agency-wide and F.E.M.A. as a whole has a need to let go of a given number of people, wouldn't it be ethical, responsible, logical and fair to release people from all areas of the enterprise on equal or close to equal numbers instead of closing down a single center?

If that were the case, shouldn't the logical step to release employees on any level, be to release the ones with less than perfect records and keep those who can contribute more to the agency all the way until the end?

The entire body of HSSs as a unit brings this inquiry and many others up parting from past instances in which massive releases and other types of "changes" have occurred and no explanations have been given. We also bring up the concern that it seems like every time there is a need to rid the agency of personnel the PRNPSC seems to be the first in line to be thinned of it's ranks.

The following are a series of questions that were asked of the management and their decision and none received answers, yet we are still waiting for them.

According to Mr. Le Maire the decision to let us go at this point was the last option they had and it was one made with a heavy heart and only taken after looking at all possible alternatives. If this is the case then that means the department in charge of making the decision must've been working on this and other options for weeks, perhaps months. How come Mr. Le Maire couldn't share any of the many other options contemplated?

If indeed this has been going on for weeks, how come for the last eight weeks we have been allowed to remain at home under the false pretence that once the safety hazard are taken care of, we would return back to our jobs?

How come when headquarters personnel visit our center it is always brought to our attention that the other centers are slightly understaffed yet now there seems to be a surplus issue we were unaware of?

Is it logical for the agency to let go of the only bilingual staff on the entire enterprise? Knowing that we handle all the English calls we get on a regular basis plus 99% of all Spanish speaking calls; What will

happen to the hundreds or even thousands of Spanish speaking people that require assistance from now on?

Two mayor facts are: The internal production and performance report known as IPR is allegedly the basis for measuring the quality of a center and it's members and a key component of the release/re-hire process since seniority is no longer a factor for consideration. Second, it has been said and shown that Puerto Rico has maintained a high quality percentage of IPR totals since it's introduction. With that said, we ask: What was the reason for the current massive release on the PRNPSC when Mr. Le Maire made it clear several times that IPR was not something they looked at this time to arrive at this conclusion? Why was the PRNPSC found expendable this time around?

If safety is a concern and the building was deemed unsafe for over 300 people to work in it, why is it considered safe and eligible to be used by 30 people when the rotations start on Monday the 21st of 2008?

How come when safety was an issue in Maryland and in Virginia, those NPSCs were given leave and accommodations when merited yet our center looks the same after 8 weeks of hiatus and we can't return to work even though we are able and willing?

We as a unit find hard to believe that a surplus of personnel was noted by headquarters and when the time came to release close to 300 people, all of the sudden an inspection deems or facilities unfit for employees and we had to be let go.

Is it expected of the PRNPSC to believe that it is all a coincidence when this building has not been inspected in over 10 years of FEMA service?

Does the administration truly believe that the rotation of personnel, offering 2 weeks of work every other number of months will work until the end of the fiscal year?

We as a group of people are proud of our jobs and proud of the work we do within the agency. We are used to giving it all and it pains us to resort to this type of action. Nonetheless it is our firm belief that beyond the call of what needs to be done for the benefit of the agency, the employees and the public, there are factors and traces of ill will toward the Puerto Rico employees that can not be ignored anymore. The PRNPSC has been the fallback for many situations at enterprise-level such as being paid less for the same jobs carried out in other

facilities. Several times we have been denied training and system rights even though there is a need for personnel to tackle the job.

It has been documented that Quality Control personnel take a certain interest in surveying PRNPSC personnel. QC reports show a rather large percentage of calls monitored in comparison to other facilities on a constant basis.

As this, there are countless instances in which the employees of this facility feel inadequate and even persecuted by our colleagues at other states. As a center we are not treated with the same quick response as continental NPSCs and although we would hope otherwise, we all agree that a racial agenda has been carried over our workplace for quite some time. It is no secret, not only among members of the workforce but to the public's knowledge that the Puerto Rico branch is always in constant threat of being closed. This over the fact that we have documentation to prove our outstanding involvement with the disasters we tackle.

Besides the aforementioned situations, there are a series of details that can't be ignored either and that scream in one way or another, segregation. On the meeting held on July 15th a new memo was handed out and distributed all throughout the intranet via email to the parties that are deployed in continental US. In the second to last paragraph we, the PRNPSC are: *"thanked for our contributions in serving the American people throughout the years..."*. It is important to note that we as puertoricans are Americans as well, we are not a foreign country that lends their services, we worked for our people, and there is no need to separate us as a different class or type of citizen. We did not help "the Americans". We are Americans. This type of unequal treatment and racial profiling is most evident now with the pseudo closing of the center and we find insulting the fact that they offered us two weeks of work every 4 to 5 months when we have proven time over time the quality of our craft.

The staff stands ready to face this new step in our collective and individual lives, yet we will not stand down until a fair explanation is given and we are granted justice for the disrespectful way this agency has treated us both continuously over the years and especially most recently.