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Boyle, Brendan F.
Brady (PA)
Brady (TX)
Brat
Bridenstine
Brooks (AL)
Brooks (IN)
Brown (MD)
Brownley (CA)
Buchanan
Buck
Bucshon
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Burgess
Bustos
Butterfield
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Calvert
Capuano
Carbajal
Cárdenas
Carson (IN)
Carter (GA)
Carter (TX)
Cartwright
Castor (FL)
Castro (TX)
Chabot
Chaffetz
Cheney
Chu, Judy
Cicilline
Clark (MA)
Clarke (NY)
Clay
Clever
Clyburn
Coffman
Cohen
Cole
Collins (GA)
Collins (NY)
Comer
Comstock
Conaway
Connolly
Conyers
Cook
Cooper
Correa
Costa
Costello (PA)
Courtney
Cramer
Crawford
Crist
Crowley
Cuellar
Culberson
Curbelo (FL)
Davidson
Davis (CA)
Davis, Danny
Davis, Rodney
DeFazio
DeGette
Delaney
DeLauro
DelBene
Demings
Denham
Dent
DeSantis
DeSaulnier
Deutch
Diaz-Balart
Dingell
Doggett
Donovan
Doyle, Michael F.
Duffy
Duncan (SC)
Duncan (TN)
Dunn
Ellison
Emmer
Engel
Eshoo
Espallat
Estes (KS)
Esty (CT)
Evans
Farenthold
Faso
Ferguson
Fitzpatrick

Fleischmann
Flores
Fortenberry
Foster
Fox
Frankel (FL)
Franks (AZ)
Frelinghuysen
Fudge
Gabbard
Gaetz
Gallagher
Gallego
Garamendi
Garrett
Gibbs
Gohmert
Gonzalez (TX)
Goodlatte
Gosar
Gotthelmer
Gowdy
Granger
Graves (GA)
Graves (MO)
Green, Al
Green, Gene
Griffith
Grijalva
Grothman
Guthrie
Gutiérrez
Hanabusa
Harper
Harris
Hartzler
Hastings
Heck
Hensarling
Herrera Beutler
Hice, Jody B.
Higgins (LA)
Higgins (NY)
Hill
Himes
Holding
Hollingsworth
Hoyer
Hudson
Huffman
Huizenga
Hultgren
Hunter
Hurd
Issa
Jackson Lee
Jayapal
Jeffries
Jenkins (KS)
Jenkins (WV)
Johnson (GA)
Johnson (LA)
Johnson (OH)
Johnson, E. B.
Jones
Jordan
Joyce (OH)
Kaptur
Katko
Keating
Kelly (IL)
Kelly (MS)
Kelly (PA)
Kennedy
Khanna
Kihuen
Kildee
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King (IA)
King (NY)
Kinzinger
Knight
Krishnamoorthi
Kuster (NH)
Kustoff (TN)
Labrador
LaHood
LaMalfa
Lamborn
Lance
Langevin
Larsen (WA)
Larson (CT)
Latta
Lawrence
Lawson (FL)
Lee
Levin

Lewis (GA)
Lewis (MN)
Lieu, Ted
Lipinski
LoBiondo
Loebsack
Lofgren
Long
Love
Lowenthal
Lowe
Lucas
Luetkemeyer
Lujan Grisham, M.
Luján, Ben Ray
Lynch
MacArthur
Maloney, Sean
Marchant
Marino
Marshall
Massie
Mast
Matsui
McCarthy
McCaul
McClintock
McCollum
McEachin
McGovern
McHenry
McKinley
McMorris
Rodgers
McNerney
Meadows
Meehan
Meeks
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Messer
Mitchell
Moolenaar
Mooney (WV)
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Moulton
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Murphy (FL)
Murphy (PA)
Nadler
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Norcross
Nunes
O'Halleran
O'Rourke
Olson
Palazzo
Pallone
Palmer
Panetta
Pascrell
Paulsen
Payne
Pearce
Pelosi
Perlmutter
Perry
Peters
Peterson
Pingree
Pittenger
Pocan
Poe (TX)
Poliquin
Polis
Posey
Price (NC)
Quigley
Raskin
Ratcliffe
Reed
Reichert
Renacci
Rice (NY)
Rice (SC)
Richmond
Roby
Roe (TN)
Rogers (AL)
Rogers (KY)
Rohrabacher
Rokita
Rooney, Francis
Rooney, Thomas J.
Ros-Lehtinen

Rosen
Roskam
Ross
Rotfuss
Rouzer
Roybal-Allard
Royce (CA)
Ruiz
Ruppersberger
Rush
Russell
Rutherford
Ryan (OH)
Sánchez
Sanford
Sarbanes
Scalise
Schakowsky
Schiff
Schneider
Schradler
Schweikert
Scott (VA)
Scott, Austin
Scott, David
Sensenbrenner
Serrano
Sessions
Sewell (AL)
Shea-Porter
Sherman
Shimkus
Shuster

Black
Cummings
DesJarlais
Graves (LA)

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Smith (WA)
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Stewart
Stivers
Suzuki
Takano
Taylor
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Thompson (CA)
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Thompson (PA)
Thornberry
Tiberi
Tipton
Titus
Tonko
Torres
Trott
Tsongas
Turner
Upton
Valadao

NOT VOTING—11

Johnson, Sam
Loudermilk
Maloney
Carolyn B.
McSally
Newhouse
Swalwell (CA)
Velázquez

□ 1400

So (two-thirds being in the affirmative) the rules were suspended and the bill was passed.

The result of the vote was announced as above recorded.

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

PERSONAL EXPLANATION

Mr. GRAVES of Louisiana. Mr. Speaker, I was absent from votes today on account of traveling with the Vice President on official business to Louisiana. Had I been present, I would have voted "yea" on Roll Call No. 274, "yea" on Roll Call No. 275, "yea" on Roll Call No. 276, "yea" on Roll Call No. 277, and "yea" on Roll Call No. 278.

MESSAGE FROM THE SENATE

A message from the Senate by Ms. Curtis, one of its clerks, announced that the Senate has passed without amendment a bill of the House of the following title:

H.R. 375. An act to designate the Federal building and United States courthouse located at 719 Church Street in Nashville, Tennessee, as the "Fred D. Thompson Federal Building and United States Courthouse".

ANNOUNCEMENT BY THE SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. DUNCAN of South Carolina). Pursuant to clause 8 of rule XX, the Chair will postpone further proceedings today on motions to suspend the rules on which a recorded vote or the yeas and nays are ordered, or on which the vote incurs objection under clause 6 of rule XX.

The House will resume proceedings on postponed questions at a later time.

REQUIRING AN ANNUAL REPORT TO CONGRESS RELATING TO THE USE OF OFFICIAL TIME BY FEDERAL EMPLOYEES

Mr. ROSS. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 1293) to amend title 5, United States Code, to require that the Office of Personnel Management submit an annual report to Congress relating to the use of official time by Federal employees, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 1293

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. REPORTING REQUIREMENT.

(a) IN GENERAL.—Section 7131 of title 5, United States Code, is amended by adding at the end the following:

"(e)(1)(A) Not later than March 31 of each calendar year, the Office of Personnel Management, in consultation with the Office of Management and Budget, shall submit to each House of Congress a report on the operation of this section during the fiscal year last ending before the start of such calendar year.

"(B) Not later than December 31 of each calendar year, each agency (as defined by section 7103(a)(3)) shall furnish to the Office of Personnel Management the information which such Office requires, with respect to such agency, for purposes of the report which is next due under subparagraph (A).

"(2) Each report by the Office of Personnel Management under this subsection shall include, with respect to the fiscal year described in paragraph (1)(A), at least the following information:

"(A) The total amount of official time granted to employees.

"(B) The average amount of official time expended per bargaining unit employee.

"(C) The specific types of activities or purposes for which official time was granted, and the impact which the granting of such official time for such activities or purposes had on agency operations.

"(D) The total number of employees to whom official time was granted, and, of that total, the number who were not engaged in any activities or purposes except activities or purposes involving the use of official time.

"(E) The total amount of compensation (including fringe benefits) afforded to employees in connection with activities or purposes for which they were granted official time.

"(F) The total amount of official time spent by employees representing Federal employees who are not union members in matters authorized by this chapter.

"(G) A description of any room or space designated at the agency (or its subcomponent) where official time activities will be conducted, including the square footage of any such room or space.

"(3) All information included in a report by the Office of Personnel Management under this subsection with respect to a fiscal year—

"(A) shall be shown both agency-by-agency and for all agencies; and

"(B) shall be accompanied by the corresponding information (submitted by the Office in its report under this subsection) for the fiscal year before the fiscal year to which such report pertains, together with appropriate comparisons and analyses.

"(4) For purposes of this subsection, the term "official time" means any period of time, regardless of agency nomenclature—

"(A) which may be granted to an employee under this chapter (including a collective bargaining agreement entered into under this chapter) to perform representational or consultative functions; and

“(B) during which the employee would otherwise be in a duty status.”.

(b) *APPLICABILITY.*—The amendment made by subsection (a) shall be effective beginning with the report which, under the provisions of such amendment, is first required to be submitted by the Office of Personnel Management to each House of Congress by a date which occurs at least 6 months after the date of the enactment of this Act.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. ROSS) and the gentleman from Virginia (Mr. CONNOLLY) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Florida.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. ROSS. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material on the bill under consideration.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Florida?

There was no objection.

Mr. ROSS. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of my bill, H.R. 1293, to amend title 5 of the United States Code to require the Office of Personnel Management to submit an annual report to Congress relating to the use of official time by Federal employees.

Mr. Speaker, I am here today to talk about a bill that would provide taxpayers with greater transparency of official time. “Official time” is that term that describes when Federal employees do union work on the taxpayers’ dime.

The only standard provided by the statute authorizing official time is that the employees perform union work on official time in a manner that is “reasonable, necessary, and in the public interest.” Currently, Federal law does not require agencies to report, annually, on the amount of official time their employees perform.

Until March of this year, the Office of Personnel Management had not reported on official time since fiscal year 2012. When the report was released in March, the data was out of date, containing information from fiscal year 2014.

While the Office of Personnel Management may request that agencies provide data related to official time, OPM does not have any set of standards or procedures prescribing the collection of official time data. Considering the burden that official time puts on the taxpayer, more stringent reporting is necessary.

The latest data provided by OPM shows that taxpayers paid \$162 million for salary and benefits related to work done in official time in fiscal year 2014, up from \$157 million 2 years earlier in fiscal year 2012.

Agencies reported that bargaining unit employees spent a total of 3.5 million hours performing representational activities on official time.

The current lack of stringent reporting requirements, as well as the broad interpretation of the statute’s sole requirement that official time be carried out in a way that is reasonable, necessary, and in the public interest, have clearly opened the door to abuse.

The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform identified several cases where employees on official time engaged in all sorts of inappropriate activities while on taxpayer-funded time, including everything from leisure to criminal activities. With greater transparency, employees will be less likely to abuse the system, which will result in less waste of taxpayer dollars.

It is by far time we require agencies to provide this information to Congress and to 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.

To accomplish this, H.R. 1293 requires agencies to provide more detailed information to OPM regarding what their employees are doing related to official time. Specifically, the bill requires agencies to report the total amount of official time granted to employees, the average amount of time each employee spends on official time, the specific types of activities for which official time was granted, and the impact official time had on agency operations.

H.R. 1293 requires agencies to report the amount of compensation employees received in connection with the time they spent on activities in connection with official time.

Finally, the bill requires agencies to report a description of rooms and spaces agencies use to conduct official time.

H.R. 1293 will provide taxpayers with the transparency they deserve when it comes to official time.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support this bill, and I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

I must say, Mr. Speaker, I originally rose in support of what I thought was a simple reporting bill. In listening to my friend from Florida, this is part and parcel of the negative narrative that is sent in all too frequently on the other side of the aisle about hardworking civil servants and Federal employees. They are not all somehow committing crime on official time. Official time, in fact, has been used to the benefit of the workforce and to the benefit of management.

If this bill, H.R. 1293, is nothing but a precursor to further encroachment on the rights of Federal workers, then I will oppose this bill, and I will urge my Members on this side of the aisle to oppose this bill because, by voting for it, we are enabling something much worse to follow and have this thrown in our faces.

So, Mr. Speaker, I regret that, under the circumstances, and with the mes-

sage I have just heard, I can no longer support this bill. I can no longer urge my colleagues to support this bill, and we will, in fact, urge a negative vote on this bill.

I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. ROSS. Mr. Speaker, I might just suggest to my good friend from Virginia that this is a reporting bill, that this is the same bill, as amended by their amendment, that was passed out of committee overwhelmingly, that I believe the gentleman from Virginia voted for. So there has not been any change. It is still a transparency reporting bill to make sure that we account for all the time spent in official time on the taxpayer dime. That is it.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to yield 3 minutes to the gentleman from Georgia (Mr. JODY B. HICE).

Mr. JODY B. HICE of Georgia. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Florida for yielding this time.

I agree with this great reporting bill. The American people have a right to at least have a reasonable expectation that the Federal Government knows what its employees are doing. Unfortunately, we all know that doesn’t always happen, particularly when it comes to the practice of official time. It is amazing to me how little information there is, particularly as it relates to the reporting aspect, as to what is happening under official time.

For those who don’t know what it is, Mr. Ross mentioned it well. Established under the Carter administration, official time allows Federal employee union members to conduct union activities during their work-hours of the agency for which they were hired even if the union activity has nothing to do with their job description. Surprisingly, the Federal agencies are not required to report to Congress the amount of time that employees are spending conducting union business.

Some of my colleagues may disagree about the value of official time. I get that. The gentleman from Virginia and I see differently on this. I certainly oppose the abuse of official time, so we see differently on this.

But I think we can all agree that the American people at least have the right to know the extent to which official time is being used. So, although we may disagree somewhat on policy, I think we can certainly find common ground to promote accountability and transparency within the Federal Government.

As Mr. Ross mentioned a while ago, the OPM has come out with a study: 3.5 million work-hours spent on official time. That is a lot if it was just dollars, but when you take 3.5 million work-hours multiplied by dollars involved, this is a significant issue that needs to be addressed.

This bill, H.R. 1293, grants the OPM the ability to get necessary information from Federal agencies so that we have a more comprehensive understanding of the official time usage. Currently, there are no standards for OPM to find that kind of information.

So this bill does not eliminate, nor does it restrict, official time usage; it simply shines light on the practice. Again, I believe we can find common ground that the American people deserve to know how their tax dollars are spent.

This is common sense. It is good governance. It is a bill that I believe we should all be able to get behind. I am pleased to support this bill. I am honored and pleased to do so in the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee. I urge all our colleagues to support it now.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Speaker, my friend from Florida is my friend and he knows I respect him, but when you give an opening statement on a bill that goes far beyond a reporting requirement that we thought we were supporting and you use the occasion to disparage Federal workers and to characterize them in a decidedly negative way as if that somehow really described the average civil servant and what they are up to, then on this side of the aisle, we take exception. Then it is no longer a simple reporting bill; it is a precursor of bad things to come, and we are not going to be party to it. We are not going to enable that. That is why, reluctantly, I must now oppose this bill and urge my Democratic colleagues and those on the other side of the aisle who want to protect Federal employees and honor them and give them the dignity and respect they deserve also to oppose this bill.

Mr. Speaker, I now am pleased to yield 2 minutes to the gentlewoman from the District of Columbia (Ms. NORTON), my dear friend.

Ms. NORTON. Mr. Speaker, I thank my good friend from Virginia for yielding to me.

You haven't heard any discussion of abuse of official time because there is no record of abuse of official time. My colleagues on the other side simply want to get rid of official time, as they have wanted to do for decades.

A little background: Federal employees have no right to strike, as they do in the private sector. In return, though, the time-honored right to organize and represent employees in their official capacity on matters relating to the workplace has always been in place under Republicans and Democrats alike.

Remember, there is also no requirement to join a union in the first place; yet unions must represent all workers, regardless of their membership or not.

The bill on the House floor, H.R. 1293, is unnecessary. Official time reports are already required. This is a redundant bill.

If my friend is worried that these reports haven't been timely, as he implied then he can do that administratively or do it in this bill. The reason he doesn't do it in this bill is this bill is a cover. It is a cover for two pending bills which are already out of committee. I expect them on the floor any minute now, although, notice the sequence.

□ 1415

Mr. Speaker, this seemingly vanilla bill, is going to be followed by the real bills that my colleagues are after. They are parallel bills. They essentially eliminate official time to represent workers.

Now, why is official time important? They are important for the operation of the Federal Government itself. And why is that? Because there are always going to be disputes and contention between management and labor. Official takes away time that would otherwise be wasted and allows the parties to go to the table and work matters out.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The time of the gentlewoman has expired.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Speaker, I yield an additional 1 minute to the gentlewoman from the District of Columbia.

Ms. NORTON. Mr. Speaker, these two bills are a frontal attack on official time, but they actually stab federal employees in the back. One bill would make it virtually impossible for union members to volunteer their time unless they wanted to give up parts of their retirement benefits.

What kind of quid pro quo is that? What do you want to do next? Reduce pay if a union rep uses official time?

The next bill designates employees who cannot represent other employees. This bill looks like something you would expect from countries where there is no right to organize.

This bill reduces the amount of dues unions can collect, even though they are collecting dues on their own time and not official time. This is a brazen attempt to eliminate the fair-share fee, non-union workers pay for being represented equally with union members, and allow free riders to be served free of charge. This is the beginning of an out-and-out assault on the freedom of workers to organize.

Mr. ROSS. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume. I want to be clear here, because I want to make sure that we are talking about the same bill.

This bill doesn't do anything about union dues. This bill doesn't do anything other than require the transparency of reporting official time. And I would be delighted to engage my good friend from Virginia, whom I have a great deal of respect for, and I have worked very diligently on this committee with for some time, and inquire as to what transpired since this bill left committee until today that would cause him and others who were supportive of it in committee to now say that it is not?

I don't mean to misrepresent anything. While I might have opinions of what I believe, I can tell you factually that this bill is merely, and solely, and exclusively a reporting bill. If I were managing a company and I wanted to know where my resources were, I would want to make sure I managed those resources—including my human resources—so I would like to know where the time of my employees is spent.

There is no prohibition of time being spent. There is no restriction of time being spent. It is merely a reporting bill. It is requiring reporting. It is something the OPM has done before. It was started under President Carter's administration.

Mr. Speaker, I inquire of my good friend if there is anything that has changed to make his opposition now come to the floor?

Mr. CONNOLLY. Will the gentleman yield?

Mr. ROSS. I yield to the gentleman from Virginia.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Speaker, I thank my friend because I am going to run out of time. I must say to my friend, my prepared remarks were designed to support this bill.

Mr. ROSS. And I appreciate that.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Speaker, I must say, the gentleman from Florida, who is an honorable man and a friend, and we have collaborated, but his own words transformed what this really was. They persuaded us that by voting for this, we are not voting for a reporting bill. That is just the beginning.

My friend from Florida is the one who characterized criminal activity on official time, and unsavory things going on on official time, and allows that to dangle out there as if that characterizes Federal employees generally.

I say to any friend—and I thank him for yielding—that has transformed our perception of this bill. This is no longer a simple reporting bill—although technically that is what it is. It is a precursor, apparently, to an assault of Federal employees—and on official time, specifically—and we cannot be partners to that. We cannot be enablers to that.

Mr. Speaker, therefore, we must oppose this bill, in light of the context my friend from Florida himself said.

Mr. ROSS. Mr. Speaker, reclaiming my time, while I understand where my colleague from Virginia is taking my comments from, I must submit that at no time did I allege that the Federal employees, all Federal employees, are committing crimes on official time.

I think just the opposite. A vast majority of our Federal employees are probably some of the best workforce that we have out there. I think that, in any workforce, you are going to have some people that don't live up to the standards of their employment. So what I merely do in my opening statement is to say that there has been a need for transparency that includes the abuse of time by some, not by all.

Again, the vast majority of Federal employees are exceptional employees, hardworking, and absolutely necessary to run this great country.

Mr. Speaker, I ask my good friend from Virginia to please reconsider, and I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Speaker, I am certainly gratified for the clarification of my friend.

It now gives me great pleasure to yield 3 minutes to the gentleman from

Massachusetts (Mr. LYNCH), my good friend and a senior member of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

Mr. LYNCH. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Virginia for yielding, and I join him in opposition to this bill.

While originally my remarks would have been much kinder to the bill, and I may have considered supporting it, I did not consider it favorably in committee. I know we had a voice vote on that. But in light of the unfortunate remarks that imply that there was illegal activity going on by Federal employees, and that is why we need this bill that is before us right now, I do have to agree with the ranking member, the gentleman from Virginia, that this bill is, indeed, a part of the vanguard of legislation to severely restrict and eliminate the use of official time.

Under the bipartisan Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, a Federal employee who serves as a union steward or union representative may be granted official time to perform activities that—and this is the important standard that is in the bill—the gentleman from Georgia indicated that we need this bill because there is no standard.

The standard in the Civil Service Reform Act requires a number of things: It requires both labor and management to agree on the use of official time, and that official time be “reasonable, necessary, and in the public interest.”

That is the standard today, and every single Federal workplace—management and labor—have to agree that the use of official time is reasonable, that it is necessary, and that it is in the public interest. That is a great standard, and that is what has been going on so far.

While there are those who seek to curb or repeal the statutory right and may claim that it amounts to misuse of government resources, let me offer you another concrete example of why official time is critical to the Federal workplace and serves the interests of the American people and taxpayer.

In the wake of the devastating terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the Nation also endured a series of anthrax attacks perpetuated through the United States mail system against media offices in Florida, New York, and also Federal offices here in the Nation’s Capital. The affected facilities included the Brentwood Mail Processing and Distribution Center here in D.C., that is now named after two dedicated postal employees, Thomas Morris and Joseph Curseen, who lost their lives to anthrax exposure at that facility.

This is immediately after September 11. They were postal workers. They died of inhalation of anthrax poisoning because of the jobs they were doing on behalf of this country. The risk of further anthrax attacks threatened the safety of our postal workforce. I had two sisters with young children at the time working at the post office, and I knew of this well.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The time of the gentleman has expired.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Speaker, I yield an additional 1 minute to my friend from Massachusetts.

Mr. LYNCH. It jeopardized the safety of our postal workforce and customers, as well as the free flow of information and commerce that the constitutional responsibility of the United States Postal Service requires.

But rather than refusing to go to work in a dangerous workplace, by the use of official time, the management of the United States Postal Service, and the union representatives of the United States Postal Service sat down and worked out a measure where the union agreed to send their workers in, the mail kept running to every home and business in America, but the postal workers absorbed that danger on their own because they knew that steps were being taken to keep them and their families—because the threat was that anthrax would get on their clothes and they would bring that back to their own homes. We worked that out.

That agreement would not have been worked out but for the use of official time—and a lot of official time that was used in that crisis. That is the responsibility that those union representatives had to the workers. They have to guarantee a safe workplace for those workers, and that is why we should vote against this bill. This is a wolf in sheep’s clothing, and we ought to vote this down.

Mr. ROSS. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume. If I might just, again, clarify for the record, this is a reporting bill. It is a transparency bill. The standard that my good friend from Massachusetts discusses, and that I agreed with, is not affected at all by this bill.

I would have no doubt whatsoever that in similar circumstances that happened after 9/11 in those post offices, that those same employees, regardless of the risk, would do exactly what they did, because that is how valuable they are to the system. That is how valuable they are to this country.

What I can’t understand is what has transpired between voting this out of committee to today that has changed the opinion.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Speaker, I yield 2 minutes to the gentlewoman from Michigan (Mrs. LAWRENCE), my dear friend.

Mrs. LAWRENCE. Mr. Speaker, I thank Congressman CONNOLLY.

I rise today coming in saying I would support this bill. Many people know I served 30 years as a Federal employee working in HR, understanding labor relations, safety issues, environmental issues, diversity issues, and knowing clear well that the official time that is allotted to employees to sit down with their representative of the union to talk about if they feel like they are being sexually harassed, if they feel

like they are in an environment that is not safe for them, official time is extremely necessary.

What happens in official time? It allows a lot of grievances to be processed and resolved through communication between union and management.

There have been several legislative reform proposals introduced to address the way union representatives are allowed to utilize official time.

Now, I was taken back when my colleague said “criminal activities.” Mr. Speaker, criminal activity is something that is in a whole different venue. If you are a Federal employee and you create an illegal activity, you do not need official time to do that. I have never known, in the time that I served in HR, in labor relations, and served in all of the different capacities, have I seen someone doing criminal activity on official time.

It would be a different thing if we were clear that this bill was about reporting the time, which I would not oppose. But when you present this scenario about official time, as it being something that is negative, something that is being used in a criminal capacity, that is totally something I would be opposed to.

Let me tell you some examples of what representatives can use it for: If there is a whistleblower accusation, an employee would go to their union steward and ask for official time.

If it was a grievance on behalf of the employee, they can use it.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The time of the gentlewoman has expired.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Speaker, I yield an additional 30 seconds to the gentlewoman from Michigan.

Mrs. LAWRENCE. Mr. Speaker, union representatives can also assist if it is an OSHA issue, if it is racial discrimination, or sexual harassment.

Instead of allowing employees to complete nonpolitical activities, some of my colleagues seem more interested in preventing employees from doing their jobs by using official time.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleague to defeat senseless attacks against Federal employees’ official time.

Mr. ROSS. Mr. Speaker, might I inquire how much time is remaining?

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The gentleman from Florida has 9½ minutes remaining. The gentleman from Virginia has 8½ minutes remaining.

Mr. ROSS. Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Speaker, I yield 2 minutes to the gentlewoman from New Jersey (Mrs. WATSON COLEMAN), my friend.

Mrs. WATSON COLEMAN. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for the opportunity to discuss this bill, and I want to thank the colleague from across the aisle here who has illuminated the future as it relates to undertaking this whole issue.

It is with that in mind that I want to speak to the value of the use of official time.

□ 1430

While I am not concerned so much about the collection of the information as to what is happening, I am concerned with how it is being translated and will be used in the future.

For decades, both Republicans and Democrats alike have strongly supported the use of official time because it streamlines the efficiency and quality of government. We should be thanking our union representatives who use official time to address workplace problems and operational issues within our government.

Within our Federal Government, official time leads to swift conflict resolutions that would otherwise require costly litigation, improves the relationship between labor and management, and protects whistleblowers who have exposed government waste and abuse. In some cases, it has even saved lives, as in the issue of AFGE local president Kathleen Dahl, when there was a breakout of Legionnaires' disease.

Furthermore, official time costs one-tenth of 1 percent of the cost of salaries and benefits for all Federal employees. That is a fraction of employee compensation. Ultimately, it saves taxpayers dollars and ensures transparency.

So while we may be discussing today simply a bill that will record the time that is spent in such a noble and important function, it is simply a precursor to the disparaging of union workers and Federal workers as we move forward. Mr. Speaker, I oppose any movement in that direction.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Speaker, I yield 2 minutes to the gentleman from Maryland (Mr. SARBANES).

Mr. SARBANES. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

Mr. Speaker, I came to the floor today expecting to support H.R. 1293, which has to do with the reporting of official time, but based on the negative commentary we are getting generally about official time and the knock against Federal employees we have heard here today, I am anxious now about supporting this bill because it appears that what is happening is our colleagues on the other side are setting the table for bringing other legislation eventually to the floor that is actually going to attack and undermine official time.

My colleague earlier referred to a wolf in sheep's clothing represented by this bill. You can look at it as the camel's nose under the tent. Whatever it is, I am worried now that the agenda here is to undermine official time.

Let's remind ourselves of the various benefits of official time. It helps to resolve workplace disputes, which is really important. It helps to improve efficiency within the workplace. It is what leads to negotiating positive agreements between labor and management. It is how official time, when it is used wisely—and there is no evidence that it is not used wisely; there is no evidence

of abuse or misuse of official time—and when it is used the way it has been used, it helps our Federal agencies help the American people. It helps these agencies function well.

I hope that we can reject whatever is coming down the pipeline. I was cautiously optimistic when I came to support this bill that these other efforts that seem to be underway were maybe being put to bed, but now I am concerned that there is an agenda coming. So we will just have to see how it goes.

I want to reiterate my strong support for the use of official time the way it is used by our Federal employees, which is in a very positive fashion, and I urge my colleagues on the other side to protect official time and all of its benefits.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Speaker, I agree with my friend from Maryland. Official time is a very useful tool in the Federal workplace, both for management and for labor, and has proved its worth over the years.

Mr. Speaker, I yield 2 minutes to the gentleman from California (Mr. TAKANO).

Mr. TAKANO. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

Mr. Speaker, I had intended to support H.R. 1293, but after hearing the remarks from the chairman on the floor this morning, I am afraid that this bill is just a precursor for what the majority will try to do to our dedicated Federal employees.

The sentiments expressed by the chairman are in line with the legislation that appeared before the Veterans' Affairs Committee just this past week, legislation that would have undermined the use of official time for employees at the VA. So there are attacks happening in other parts of the House.

The committee marked up H.R. 1461, the misnamed VET Protection Act. This bill would limit the amount of time VA employees can use for official time to improve working conditions for themselves and for their colleagues and, in turn, improve services for veterans.

We considered this bill, despite the fact we didn't have clear data on the impact of the bill on the VA's HR capability. I realize this bill we are considering on the floor today is about that data, but the spirit in which it is being moved forward is not about trying to illuminate how official time has helped our veterans.

There are 49,386 vacant positions at the VA. Rolling back the use of official time will only increase the demands on the VA's human resources staff, making it harder to fill positions and recruit and retain quality providers.

Official time benefits our veterans. In Pittsburgh, as was mentioned before by my colleague from New Jersey, an AFGE president used official time to press the VA to address a Legionnaires' disease outbreak that killed 6 veterans and made 16 others sick. Her actions helped save veterans' lives, and she used official time to do it.

At the Phoenix VA there was a 29 percent turnover rate for licensed prac-

tical nurses. Union representatives used official time to improve working conditions and cut the turnover rate in half. Less turnover means better care for veterans.

I warn my colleagues against this bill and future misguided legislation to undermine official time and the function of our Federal agencies.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself the balance of my time.

In attempting to summarize, Mr. Speaker, I do want to reiterate that my friend from Florida is an honorable man. When he says this is about one thing, I believe him. Perhaps in the introduction to this bill there was a characterization that was not intended, and I accept that explanation.

Federal workers are hardworking civil servants. They serve the American people. I know my friend from Florida agrees. The overwhelming majority of them are dedicated. They seize a mission every day, whether it be at the VA, the Social Security Administration, or our Nation's parks. They are dedicated to the proposition that they are there to serve the American people. It is important to honor their service, to respect their service, to not allow even the inference to be drawn that a negative example somehow could be construed as characteristic of the whole, for that is false.

That is the narrative we Democrats and, hopefully, a number of Republicans want to change, because it is not true. We want to honor those civil servants.

All too often, our civil servants have become pin cushions. Again, I know my friend from Florida does not intend that, but there are others who have intended that. That sparks something, certainly, on this side of the aisle and with this Member, who represents a lot of Federal employees and cherishes their service. For us, it is a very personal matter.

Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. ROSS. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself the balance of my time.

I appreciate the comments from my friend from Virginia, and I will reiterate my comments made earlier here on this floor that we are very grateful for the Federal workforce that we do have and that they are, by far, one of the best human resources in employment in the world. We are grateful for their service.

As in any case, there might be some bad ones, but, more importantly, all this bill requests is that we just report the transparency of their services and official time. It is neither an indictment nor restriction on Federal time whatsoever, and, in fact, can be used as a tool for Federal employees to justify some of the official time they are doing for the benefit of not only their colleagues, but also this great country.

Mr. Speaker, I would again request that Members of this House support my bill, and I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from Florida (Mr. ROSS) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 1293, as amended.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds being in the affirmative) the rules were suspended and the bill, as amended, was passed.

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER FRAUD PREVENTION ACT OF 2017

Mr. ROSS. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 624) to restrict the inclusion of social security account numbers on documents sent by mail by the Federal Government, and for other purposes, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 624

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the "Social Security Number Fraud Prevention Act of 2017".

SEC. 2. RESTRICTION OF SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBERS ON DOCUMENTS SENT BY MAIL.

(a) RESTRICTION.—An agency may not include the social security account number of an individual on any document sent by mail unless the head of the agency determines that the inclusion of the social security account number on the document is necessary.

(b) REGULATIONS.—Not later than 5 years after the date of the enactment of this Act, the head of each CFO Act agency shall issue regulations specifying the circumstances under which inclusion of a social security account number on a document sent by mail is necessary. Such regulations shall include—

(1) instructions for the partial redaction of social security account numbers where feasible; and

(2) a requirement that social security account numbers not be visible on the outside of any package sent by mail.

(c) REPORT.—Not later than 30 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, and not later than the first, second, third, fourth, and fifth-year anniversary of such date of enactment, the head of each CFO Act agency shall submit to the Committee on Ways and Means and the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform of the House of Representatives, the Committee on Finance and the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs of the Senate, and any other appropriate authorizing committees of the House of Representatives and the Senate, a report on the implementation of subsection (a) that includes the following:

(1) The title and identification number of any document used by the CFO Act agency during the previous year that includes the complete social security account number of an individual.

(2) For the first report submitted, a plan that describes how the CFO Act agency will comply with the requirements of subsection (a).

(3) For the final report submitted, the title and identification number of each document used by the CFO Act agency for which the head of the agency has determined, in accordance with regulations issued pursuant to subsection (b), that the inclusion of a social security account number on such document

is necessary, and the rationale for such determination.

(4) For any other report that is not the first or final report submitted, an update on the implementation of the plan described under paragraph (2).

(d) DEFINITIONS.—In this section:

(1) AGENCY.—The term "agency" has the meaning given that term in section 551 of title 5, United States Code, but includes an establishment in the legislative or judicial branch of the Government (except the Senate, the House of Representatives, and the Architect of the Capitol, and any activities under the direction of the Architect of the Capitol).

(2) CFO ACT AGENCY.—The term "CFO Act agency" means the agencies listed in paragraphs (1) and (2) of section 901(b) of title 31, United States Code.

(e) EFFECTIVE DATE.—Subsection (a) shall apply with respect to any document sent by mail on or after the date that is 5 years after the date of the enactment of this Act.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. ROSS) and the gentleman from Virginia (Mr. CONNOLLY) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Florida.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. ROSS. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material on the bill under consideration.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Florida?

There was no objection.

Mr. ROSS. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 624, the Social Security Number Fraud Prevention Act of 2017, introduced by my good friend from California, Representative DAVID VALADAO.

I want to start by thanking Chairman BRADY and Subcommittee Chairman JOHNSON from the Ways and Means Committee for their assistance in getting this bill to the floor. Their work on addressing the unnecessary use of Social Security numbers is well appreciated by all Americans across the country and especially Members in this body.

Mr. Speaker, we live in an interconnected world. Personal identifiers, such as Social Security numbers, are used for much more than just Social Security benefits. Social Security numbers are widely used to receive government services and to apply for services in the private sector, like opening bank accounts, credit cards, and even applying for college.

The extent to which Social Security numbers are a de facto national identifier has heightened concerns about identity theft. In the wrong hands, a stolen Social Security number can be used for devastating effects.

This bill helps move the government closer to the goal of minimizing unnecessary use of Social Security numbers. All entities in the Federal Government will be prohibited from sending a So-

cial Security account number by mail, unless the head of the entity deems it necessary.

The 24 major CFO Act agencies will also have to issue regulations specifying the circumstances under which inclusion of a Social Security number is deemed necessary. They will have to ensure numbers are redacted partially, where feasible, and to ensure no numbers are visible from the outside of a mail piece.

Finally, agencies will be required to report to Congress on their progress in implementing the requirements of the law.

Mr. Speaker, this bill is very important. The Social Security Administration alone sends 223 million notices containing a full Social Security number every year. We must take care to properly safeguard the personally identifiable information of American citizens. The consequences of failure can be dire.

In 2015, the Office of Personnel Management experienced a major data breach where the personally identifiable information for 22 million Americans was compromised.

The Oversight Committee majority staff report recommended Federal agencies reduce the collection of Social Security numbers and other personally identifiable information.

Mr. Speaker, this bill is a step in the right direction. I urge my colleagues to support this bill, and I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 624, the Social Security Number Fraud Prevention Act of 2017, as amended.

Introduced by our colleague, Mr. VALADAO from California, this bill is a commonsense step to addressing an enormously growing problem of identity theft and protecting the personal information of every American.

Each year, 18 million Americans become victims of identity theft. That is 18 million. A leading cause of this problem is the unauthorized acquisition of Social Security numbers by criminals.

H.R. 624 would address this issue by restricting the instances in which agencies may include the full Social Security numbers on documents sent through the mail. The bill would prohibit agencies from including those numbers on mailed correspondence unless the head of an agency himself or herself determines that inclusion is absolutely essential.

Agencies would be required to issue regulations delineating the situations in which Social Security numbers are necessary, and would be instructed to partially redact numbers wherever feasible.

□ 1445

Agencies would also be expressly prohibited from making Social Security numbers visible on the outside of any mailed packages.