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Protecting Funding for US Foreign Language Broadcast Services

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Bill Status:

The ongoing struggle between the Broadcast Board of Governors (BBG) and supporters of America's foreign language broadcast services has again come to a head in the 110th Congress of the United States. For several years, the Broadcast Board of Governors has sought to reduce the budget or totally eliminate several important foreign language news services that have established themselves as news and information lifelines to a broad range of countries including but not limited to China, North Korea, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

The Broadcast Board of Governors (BBG) is an independent federal agency with the responsibility to oversee all U.S. government and government sponsored, non military international broadcasting. These broadcasts service more than one hundred million listeners using 61 different languages. Broadcasts are conducted through the Voice of America (VOA), Alhurra, Radio Sawa, Radio Farda, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Free Asia (RFA), and Radio and TV Martí.

CWA's mission through The Newspaper Guild is to support the work of these news service employees with particular support for those organized at Radio Free Asia. RFA, a private non-profit corporation, broadcasts news and information to listeners in Asia in 13 languages and dialects who primarily have access only to state-run media. Listeners of RFA rely on short-wave radio as a critical component for delivery of information. While the RFA has a web site and podcasts, short-wave is a critical medium for Asians living under repressive governments.

The BBG has proposed in its budget to Congress to reduce Tibetan broadcasts by one third, and eliminate the Cantonese language service. It is important to note that unit leaders work at the two languages targeted for reduction and elimination. Ironically, the BBG budget proposal would enable the Board to eliminate the union leadership at the expense of carrying out its stated mission. Almost all of the CWA recognized employees came to the United States from the very countries where RFA broadcasts are aimed. These workers understand the importance of these broadcasts is to reach billions of people with the hope of spawning democracies in East Asia. More importantly, they understand the importance of information that their respective governments deny people on a daily basis.

With the elimination of the Cantonese broadcasts, about 150 million people in China would not have access to

news that is not controlled by the government.

There are three Tibetan dialects broadcast during 8 hours of programming per day. There are six million Tibetans living in China who the government tries to deny access to news and information important to them. Tibetan refugees have cited short wave as a reliable source of news over television. Short wave is untraceable and is more difficult for the Chinese government to jam than internet, satellite dish, telephone, or cell signals.

The Appropriations Process

Each year, the Congress of the United States takes up the budget process. To understand the purpose behind funding BBG programs, one must understand the agency's purpose. The mission of the BBG is "to promote the open communication of information and ideas, in support of democracy, and the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information, worldwide." Important to our cause is Radio Free Asia which bills itself as "Your Free Press in East Asia". RFA began broadcasting in 1996 under provisions of the 1994 International Broadcasting Act (Public Law 103-236). As a result of the 1998 Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act (Public Law 105-277), the Broadcast Board of Governors became an independent government agency.

Funding for the BBG is accomplished through the House Appropriations Subcommittee for the Department of State and Related Agencies and through Senate Appropriations Subcommittees that fund State Department, Foreign Operations and related programs.

Two years ago, the BBG proposed similar budget cuts to RFA. The funding cuts caused RFA to reduce its expenses in other areas in order to maintain its broadcasting services at current levels. This year, despite a 3.8% budget increase to \$668.2 million, the Broadcast Board of Governors is again seeking to eliminate jobs held by CWA members at Radio Free Asia with an additional focus on jobs held by union members at Voice of America.

CWA Continues to Support the Struggle of Foreign Workers

In Extensions of Remarks in the Congressional Record dated Wednesday March 19, 2003, then Representative Sherrod Brown (now a United State Senator) wrote of the struggle of workers organizing for the Chinese Daily News, "Foreign employers should not be given leeway to further erode the organizing rights of US workers." This sentiment should also apply directly to US employers that seek to weaken rights of employees organizing to improve working conditions in this country for themselves, their families, and the communities in which they live and work.

In May 2003, 125 employees in nine language services voted to become part of Local 32035 to have a voice at work. Although the vote was 73-37 in favor of CWA, the management of RFA, like the foreign management of the Chinese Daily News, hired a law firm to advise them how to defeat unionization. It was perplexing to many workers that while RFA broadcasts were promoting a free press, democracy and even unions, management was telling its employees that unions aren't necessary at the worksite. Since practically all of the BBG funding comes from federal coffers, it would be unacceptable to spend taxpayer dollars to fight against employee wishes to determine whether or not they want to unionize their workplace. Rather than spending tax dollars opposing or eliminating unions or union leadership for its broadcasts, the BBG should welcome unions in its workplaces. At the very least, the BBG should allow democracy in the workplace and remain out of the unionization process.

Members of Congress should be encouraged to vote for full funding for all foreign language services. Workers that struggle for freedom in the workplace and the right to organize deserve our support.

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