

Wackenhut's Witch Hunt Tale

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Last week, union leaders from Department of Energy nuclear facilities in Oak Ridge said they are fed up with critics including our organization, the Project On Government Oversight, or POGO. This is surprising given that POGO's criticisms reflect the concerns of their own union members.

Security officers at Y-12 and other nuclear facilities are dedicated and hard-working. Some are so dedicated that they are willing to risk being fired for telling the truth about security risks and dangerous working conditions. That was the case regarding a September incident when Wackenhut personnel came within seconds of firing on unarmed coworkers during a security exercise. After being alerted to the incident by concerned insiders, POGO confirmed that it occurred through numerous eye-witnesses and senior DOE officials.

During the incident, armed guards protecting the site during the exercise were told by Wackenhut controllers that test participants were, in fact, real attackers. According to one witness: "The shadow force was stopped only seconds before they fired on the unarmed adversaries. That could have resulted in a major loss of life."

In response, Wackenhut Corporation has denied the incident occurred, even making the untrue claim that POGO "simply based their report on unsubstantiated allegations contained in an anonymous letter." In fact, POGO was not in possession of the letter when we brought the incident to light.

In recent weeks, Wackenhut has aggressively sought to intimidate its security officers into silence. A Wackenhut supervisor warned officers that if they determined who wrote the letter concerning the near "friendly-fire" incident, he or she would be fired. Since then, Wackenhut has launched a witch hunt by interviewing security officers in an effort to find the person who wrote the letter. Wackenhut has publicly described the letter as: "an anonymous letter from unknown persons purporting to be members of the guard force." However, behind closed doors, Wackenhut's threats and interviews of guards seem to show that it believes otherwise.

This type of bullying is not unusual for Wackenhut, which has fired or otherwise retaliated against whistleblowers with similar concerns at other facilities including the Alaska pipeline, the now-closed Rocky Flats nuclear facility outside Denver, and nuclear power plants. Caught cheating on security tests earlier this year, Wackenhut may fear losing its lucrative contract with the DOE which is up for renewal.

Now union leaders dispute POGO's criticisms, even though many of those criticisms reflect their

members' concerns. Union leaders claim that security officers "go through more training than the military" including "running a half mile once a year." However, there simply is no comparison. For example, military personnel are required to run two to three miles, compared to the half-mile requirement for DOE's guards.

In fact, insiders tell POGO that training has been in decline. Officers used to train three days per month. Now they train only once every six months because they are working excessive overtime, some up to 80 hours per week. Fatigue from overtime combined with a lack of training is likely what caused the near miss friendly-fire incident in the first place.

A second untrue claim is that: "Oak Ridge is probably one of the most secure sites there is." In fact, Representative Christopher Shays (R-CT), who has held a series of hearings in Congress on nuclear weapons complex security, told a national magazine last fall: "My concerns about Los Alamos ŠŠ pale in comparison to the Y-12 facility at Oak Ridge, Tennessee. That is a very vulnerable site. [It has] too many structures and not enough buffer zone [around it]. By the time the defenders knew that a security threat existed, it would be too late to respond. I know that they're working on it, but it has to be fixed today." The Government Accountability Office research agency has similarly noted that Y-12 poses the greatest security concern of all facilities in the complex.

POGO is also concerned. Y-12's six aging buildings were never designed to meet modern-day security threats. If a suicidal terrorist succeeded in getting in, he or she could create an improvised nuclear detonation that would devastate Oak Ridge, Knoxville and surrounding areas.

Security officers are not to blame for these weaknesses. And Wackenhut is not alone in the blame. The Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration which hires Wackenhut is also responsible for the failure to protect Tennessee from the threat posed by Y-12.

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