

State Department Is Slow to Hire Americans in Embassies Abroad;

Pay Scales Take Time, Agency Says;

Critics See Foot-Dragging

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Body

Almost two years after Congress decided U.S. citizens could compete for previously restricted jobs in American **embassies abroad**, the **State Department** continues to block its far-flung outposts from **hiring Americans**.

Department officials **say** the delay comes from difficulties involved in implementing the law. But disappointed job seekers and their allies in Congress contend that the **department** simply has turned a straightforward legislative directive into a bureaucratic nightmare.

At issue are approximately 9,400 positions -- among them those for drivers, cooks, clerks, secretaries, accountants and translators -- that for years were filled only by foreign nationals. In July 1991, Congress agreed that the practice amounted to discrimination against **Americans** and passed legislation opening the jobs to U.S. citizens.

The World Federation of **Americans Abroad** (WFAA), a private organization of about 150,000 members, **says** that since then, thousands of **Americans** have applied for the jobs only to be told that they can't be **hired** because the **State Department** still doesn't have an employment policy for them.

The principal problem, everyone agrees, is **State's** insistence on devising **pay scales** for different jobs in different countries that are comparable to the going rate for similar positions in the United **States**. The **department** also wants to classify American **hires** as temporary employees and provide fewer fringe benefits than those given to foreign employees.

WFAA and congressional staffers **say** that this approach conflicts with the intent of the legislation when Sen. John D. "Jay" Rockefeller IV (D-W.Va.) proposed it. In a March 3 letter to J. Brian Atwood, undersecretary of **state** for management, Rockefeller **said** that his idea was to give American employees salaries and benefits equivalent to what foreign nationals are **paid** by U.S. **embassies**. To do otherwise would discriminate against U.S. citizens, he **said**.

"It doesn't **take** a rocket scientist to understand that point," **said** one congressional staff member. "But the **State Department** continues to insist that it must have a different **scale of pay**, benefits and job security for **Americans**. When you consider that they're trying to work out a system applicable to some 150 countries, many with vastly different **pay** rates, you come away with the impression that they might be ready to start **hiring Americans** sometime after the turn of the century."

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"Such comments are terribly unfair," said Kenneth Hunter, a deputy assistant secretary of state for personnel who is developing the pay scales for Americans. "This takes a great amount of time and labor."

However, when Hunter and other State Department officials were asked why the department doesn't want to pay Americans the same as foreign employees, they didn't really have an answer. When asked about it during his confirmation hearing in March, Atwood spoke of "the desirability of making the pay scale equitable with the rates of pay received by other American employees abroad." He didn't explain what he meant.

One problem cited by Hunter is that paying Americans the same as foreign nationals would not be fair to spouses and family members of U.S. diplomats, who can be hired for some embassy jobs for less pay than foreign workers. Hunter also noted that in many Third World countries, some foreign workers are paid below the U.S. minimum wage.

Advocates of hiring Americans say that both problems can be corrected easily. Dependents of U.S. diplomats, who work in embassies, should be paid the same as other American hires, they argue. Jobs paying less than the minimum wage simply should not go to Americans.

Critics of State's approach say it reflects continued foot-dragging by a department that was against hiring Americans in the first place. Some critics also charge that the department wants a separate pay scale because Americans often would be paid less and therefore would have less incentive to apply for embassy jobs.

That reasoning is based on the fact that most positions likely to attract American applicants would be in Western Europe and Japan, where foreign employees earn fairly high salaries. By contrast, in Third World countries, salaries tend to be far below U.S. levels.

Whatever the reason, State Department officials privately acknowledge that unless there is considerably more pressure from Congress, the matter is unlikely to be resolved any time soon. Atwood, who was recently confirmed in the management post, is about to switch jobs and administer the Agency for International Development. Supporters of Rockefeller's legislation will now have to start all over with Atwood's successor.

Rockefeller recently said the new administration needs "time to get organized." But he added that State's failure to act "has gone on too long," and in his March 3 letter to Atwood, he criticized the proposed separate pay scale. "It appears to me that discrimination against Americans -- and only Americans, because they are Americans -- would be perpetuated," he said.

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