

The Columbian

Public employees file suit over union dues

Associated Press

March 16, 2006

OLYMPIA (AP) -- A handful of public employees filed a federal lawsuit against state government's largest union Wednesday, arguing that the union's attempts to collect mandatory fees are unconstitutional.

The case, filed in U.S. District Court in Spokane, is the strongest challenge yet to a contract requiring thousands of state workers to pay dues or other fees to the Washington Federation of State Employees. Union officials, however, dismissed the complaint as a baseless attack orchestrated by large businesses and other anti-labor groups.

"They see a very big target," federation spokesman Tim Welch said. "That's why they're going after our members and our contracts, but not anybody else's."

A 2002 change in state labor law allowed state workers to begin negotiating salaries with the governor instead of lobbying the Legislature for pay raises.

It also allowed their unions to collect fees from all the workers in a bargaining unit, even if those employees decide not to join the union.

The lawsuit contends the federation violated workers' rights by failing to give a proper accounting of how dues and other required union fees would be spent.

At a news conference across from the federation's offices, current and former state workers participating in the lawsuit criticized the fees rule as unfair.

Two of the plaintiffs -- Maxine Dunkelman and Patricia Woodward -- said they had been fired for refusing to pay union dues or other fees.

"I just could not force myself to pay the WFSE union fees," said Dunkelman, a former state Health Department worker. "I was fired, not due to poor work, but because I stood by my principles."

Officials from the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, the Virginia-based union critic arguing the case, said they would seek reinstatement for the fired workers, along with back pay and unspecified damages.

Copyright (c) 2006 The Columbian Publishing Co., P.O. Box 180, Vancouver, WA 98666.