

## Union halts firing requests

### Non-dues-paying state employees didn't receive explanatory letter

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OLYMPIA – After months of warning state workers to pay union fees or be fired, a major public-employees union on Wednesday reversed itself, asking that the firings be halted and offering to pay back wages for the few who've already lost their jobs.

"In this case, we made a technical mistake and we will own up to it," said Tim Welch, spokesman for the Washington Federation of State Employees.

The move, however, is likely only a reprieve for the dozens of workers who still refuse to pay. Under new state-approved worker contracts, employment is now contingent on paying a union fee.

The federation's mistake was that it forgot to include an auditor's statement in letters it sent out last May explaining why, under new collective bargaining agreements, even nonmembers would have to pay 1.13 percent of salary. (Full union members, whose dues also pay for political activities and other costs, pay 1.37 percent.)

"The information was fine," said Welch. "What was missing was a statement from the auditor saying 'I verify that these statements are correct.' It's kind of like putting on the Good Housekeeping seal. ... Minor or not, we always strive to be squeaky clean."

The Virginia-based National Right to Work Foundation, which is helping some unhappy workers sue the state over the new requirement, blasted the mistake.

Federation officials "view workers' First Amendment rights as mere 'technicalities' and are trying to backtrack after viciously ruining state employees' careers," said Stefan Gleason, vice president of the group. He said workers should be refunded millions of dollars in fees paid over the past year.

Of 38,000 workers covered by the contracts, Welch said, only about 50 are still refusing to comply. By the end of January, state Labor Relations Director Steve McLain said, half a dozen such workers had been fired.

"I don't think the number has grown much since then," he said.

Others have gotten letters like the one sent a week ago to Labor and Industries worker Stephen Sergi.

"Your employment ... will be terminated on May 1, 2006," it began, citing his refusal so far to pay the union fees. "Thank you for your service to the Department."

Those letters have been halted at the union's request, McLain said. He said the state is now deciding what to do about those who were already let go.

"We're trying to determine if some of the positions that these people were in have been filled," he said. He said the state will likely bill the union for any back pay.

Earlier this month, several workers filed suit in U.S. District Court in Spokane, arguing that the union violated their rights by not fully accounting for how their fees would be spent.

Some workers are quitting rather than pay. Cheryl Conn, a Department of Labor and Industries worker in Spokane, turned in resignation paperwork last week after she got in trouble for attending a press conference announcing the lawsuit.

"Being employed as a line staff worker is no longer providing me an opportunity to serve the public," she said. "It's become