

# State board rebuffs firefighters' request

*Appeals to administrative judges could be next step in union's attempt to void city layoffs*

By Chris Sykes  
Staff Writer

Laid-off firefighters last week learned their terminations would continue after the state Civil Service Commission denied their request for a stay. But the final chapter may yet be written

That news did not come as a surprise to them or their union representatives and became the latest legal setback in their attempt to hold onto their job in the face of Mayor Eldrige Hawkins' previous call for 20 percent combined reductions in salary and benefits.

"We knew that was going to happen," said Firefighter Elvin Padilla, president of the local firefighters' union. "The chairman attended our convention and stated he was going to rubber-stamp all layoff plans." In answering a statement from Hawkins that employees could appeal the commission's decision by paying a fee, Padilla continued, "What the mayor

probably didn't say was that the CSC expeditiously sent our case to the administrative law department in Trenton."

Peter Lyden, a spokesman for the commission, said Tuesday the union, or an attorney, can file a "good faith" layoff appeal on behalf of the firefighters. A fee of \$20 for each person must be paid in order for that person's appeal to be forwarded to Office of Administrative Law.

"The decision says there are 16 members of the Fire Department affected, 12 firefighters laid off and four fire captains demoted," said Lyden. "We need either 16 checks for \$20 each, or one check for \$320 to go forward."

Padilla said while the commission's ruling was a setback for his union, moving cases to the Office of Administrative Law meant the issue was not dead.

"The next move could mean that the truth will be exposed; the city books will be opened; and administration officials can't lie under oath or else they will be charged with

perjury," said Padilla. "I'm hoping that people will finally get to see that fiscal mismanagement, unfair negotiations and wasteful spending are what caused these layoffs."

One night before to the commission's hearing, during a City Council meeting, Council President Hassan Abdul-Rasheed gave Hawkins an opportunity to respond to union officials' critical statements.

"For the workers to sit and say the administration is not negotiating in good faith is untrue," Hawkins said. "We also have to recognize that the unions are bargaining units and it's their job to represent and advocate for their members. They are interested in what's best for their members, not necessarily what's best for the city and its taxpayers."

While Hawkins said that distinction might seem small to those unfamiliar with how government works, it is a large difference in the motivation and approach that eventually centers around cost.

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