

Unions, City At Odds Over Peace Officer Reclass Bid

By DAVID SIMS | Posted: Monday, July 18, 2011 5:00 pm

Unions that represent Peace Officers could see all of their members absorbed into one labor group in a long-gestating case before the Office of Collective Bargaining, with a decision expected within the next few months.

Unions like Teamsters Local 237 and District Council 37 Locals 983 and 2507 have fought for years to have their uniformed members, including as School Safety Officers, Parks Enforcement Patrol Officers, Emergency Medical Technicians, Fire Protection Inspectors and Health and Hospitals Police, be able to bargain directly with the city on all matters, including overtime and leave time, rather than be covered under the citywide contract governing civilian workers.

Council Overrode Mayor

Such rights are already enjoyed by members of police, fire and corrections unions, but extending them has been the subject of a long legal battle since legislation was enacted by the City Council seven years ago over Mayor Bloomberg's veto.

After the city lost a court appeal against the new law, it filed a petition with OCB to consolidate the employees within a single union, and Local 983 First Vice President Joe Puleo said that many of the final briefs have been submitted.

"The city's proposal is to put them all together. If [OCB] takes the city's side, that will be implemented," he said. "We expect a decision as early as October, if not earlier."

The unions want to be able to bargain with the city individually; a decision to merge the workers into one unit would rob several other unions of members. Local 237, which represents the majority of the city's peace officers, would be the most likely beneficiary of such a decision.

Would Prefer Status Quo

But President Gregory Floyd said in a phone interview that his union was not pushing for a consolidation. "If we could just resolve this amicably, with everyone satisfied with the outcome, that's what we're hoping," he said. "If we all don't get to keep our peace officers, there may be a court battle."

Mr. Puleo said the original push to have peace officers included as part of Local Law 56, which governs uniformed bargaining rights, "wasn't a ploy for us to get extra money...Our whole objective was for them to get a fair shake at representation."

If unions end up losing their members after such a long legal battle, he said, “It defeats the whole purpose...If that does happen, that would be unfair and essentially union-busting.”

But Labor Commissioner James F. Hanley said the unions had set themselves up by lobbying for the change in bargaining laws. “They put themselves in this position, they asked to be put in this position,” he said in a phone interview.

‘They Asked for This’

“They went to the City Council, all of these unions, and said they wanted to be taken out of the citywide contract,” he said. “[Then] they asked for all these hearings, for OCB to make a determination on what bargaining unit [to use].”

Mr. Puleo said that combining all of the officers into one unit would ignore the nuances of their jobs, which their current unions have been dealing with for years.

“We are unique, we’re the only police force in parks with various subdivisions, a harbor unit, mountain unit, search-and-rescue unit,” he said. “Whereas Local 237 people like School Safety basically do work for schools, in one type of facility. It’s the same thing with Hospital Police.”