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City layoffs begin as judge refuses to issue injunction

By Chris Sykes
Staff Writer

A Superior Court judge last week refused to issue an injunction against city officials in their plans to lay off more than 50 municipal employees. Her decision gave the administration of Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. permission to proceed immediately.

After giving municipal unions and city officials four days to continue discussing ways to avert layoffs, Assignment Judge Patricia Costello declined to issue an injunction against the city on the morning of Jan. 11. That left the unions less than 24 hours to reach a deal with officials to save their jobs.

"We did not reach a deal because they were not serious about the negotiations," said Elvin Padilla, president of the city firefighters' union. "It was all about covering the mayor's spending tracks. We met prior to the public forum he held last week and they said they wanted \$700,000 when the savings from the layoffs and demotions is only \$369,000."

The layoffs officially went into effect on Jan. 12 at 8 a.m for all released employees with the exception of police. There were rumors that police union officials were still in negotiations. Hawkins has stated he plans to restructure the department after the layoffs.

"In the Police Department, while it is true we are laying off 10 officers, we are demoting that same number of officers and detectives to put them back on the streets where they are needed," said Hawkins. "We will have the same minimum number of cars and cops on patrol and officers in the streets."

What might have been relatively good news to the Police Department was small consolation for the firefighters in Orange.

"The layoffs mean three less firefighters per group, 10 firefighters day and night, and one less engine company. The captains that are demoted will go right to permanent acting captains' status," Padilla said.

As the *Orange Transcript* neared deadline, Padilla and his members were awaiting the results of a complaint filed with the state Civil Service Commission by the state chapter of the Firemen's Benevolent Association.

A hearing regarding the complaint was scheduled for Wednesday morning.

"Our men did nothing to deserve this type of treatment," said Padilla. "We can't stop thinking about how we are going to protect the citizens that we all swore to serve who are now in danger because of this administration."

Right now, Padilla said he "couldn't be more disgusted."

"I have lost respect for those in the Hawkins Administration, Trenton and the Fire Department that did not do everything possible to stop this," said Padilla. "That includes past and present."

Hawkins said that as a police officer for the West Orange Police Department, he understood the municipal employees' plight. But as Orange's mayor, Hawkins said he had to reserve his sentiment for the city's residents.

"The people need some relief, and the bottom line is if you don't have the money, then you can't do it. We don't want the employees to suffer unnecessarily, but in these tough times this administration has had to make some hard decisions," said Hawkins. "We're always going to come down on the side of our residents, citizens and taxpayers. We've made promises to the people and this administration keeps its promises."

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