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Clash Over Schedules For HA Maintenance Workers Intensifies

By DAN ROSENBLUM 47 min ago



HARRY NESPOLI: MLC takes up cudgel for Local 237.

The dispute between Teamsters Local 237 and the Housing Authority deepened last week as the Municipal Labor Committee—the umbrella group for city unions—voted to file an amicus brief supporting the local’s attempt to block a staggered-scheduling policy.

The extended work hours, introduced by the HA two weeks ago and expected to begin at 12 developments in May, would add two additional shifts for maintenance workers such as Caretakers. The authority plans to extend the normal 8-a.m.-to-4:30-p.m. schedule by two hours in the morning and 3½ in the evening. Some will work Saturday shifts, though employees will still work the same number of hours per week. Local 237, which represents 8,000 HA employees, accused the HA of unilaterally imposing the new hours and violating its contract.

‘Could Do It to Anyone’

“The MLC feels if they could do it to that union, they could do it to any union,” MLC Chair Harry Nespoli said. “And that’s not what this administration is supposed to be like.”

The vote, which overwhelmingly passed during a March 31 conference call among members of the MLC steering committee, called for the unions to support Local 237, which two weeks ago filed an improper-practice petition with the Office of Collective Bargaining. Attorneys filed the brief April 1.

“This is what unions are about,” Mr. Nespoli said. “They’re about sticking together, and we stick together in this town.”

City officials said they have tried to reach a deal with Local 237 and pointed to contract language that said the HA has the authority to implement other

permanent shifts as it did for Caretakers at community centers.

During a March 28 Public Housing Committee hearing, HA Chair Shola Olatoye said the “FlexOps” plan was necessary to modernize its operations and give public-housing tenants the same living conditions that residents elsewhere expected. She held up a copy of the contract with Local 237, saying that it gave HA officials the ability to “assign special shifts.”

‘Our Right to Do This’

“I will certainly argue vociferously that we have the right to do this,” she said. “Our lawyers will do that further.”

Local 237 President Greg Floyd said contract issues aside, the program wouldn’t work without hiring more workers and it would reduce his members’ day-care options. “It’s dumb. It’s anti-union. It’s anti-common sense,” he said. “Why do this?”

Council Committee Chair Ritchie Torres asked the HA Chair to respond to Mr. Floyd’s criticism. “If he’s making an allegation about the sanctity of the contract, that’s not be taken lightly,” he said.

The local is planning a May 2 protest outside the agency’s lower Manhattan headquarters.

“Can you just explain your side of the dispute?” Mr. Torres said to HA officials at another portion of the hearing. “He will offer his side, the public will decide.”

“Actually, a judge will decide,” Ms. Olatoye replied.

No Coffee or Sympathy



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The HA and Local 237 met at least once every two weeks, agency officials said. But after being pressed by Mr. Torres, the union president and the Chair disagreed on how often they'd met throughout the nine-month negotiations. Though she said she'd personally sat with Mr. Floyd over coffee and had "many conversations," he countered that they met only once. "You asked the question, 'how often did we meet,' and she mentioned coffee," he said to Mr. Torres. "One, I don't drink coffee. Two, she should remember the number: one."

Ms. Olatoye said every employee will be issued reflective gear, flashlights and radios, and will work in teams. The NYPD will also have a visible presence. But the local said there will be dangers for workers during off-hours.

In a March 30 brief supporting its improper-practice petition to block FlexOps, the local stated that the HA attempted to undermine the union. "While it is true that injunctive relief is an extraordinary remedy, injunctive relief is indeed appropriate in these extraordinary circumstances," it wrote. "NYCHA has shown complete disregard for the safety of Local 237's members by refusing to agree to remedy safety violations jointly identified and acknowledged by Local 237 and NYCHA during the January and February safety assessments."

Rising Employee Costs

During last week's Council hearing, Mr. Torres questioned the HA over a projected \$60-million annual shortfall, which was less than predicted in previous years, but reflected some delays implementing the "NextGeneration" program to address its funding issues. Much of the deficit was due to Federal underfunding and personnel costs.

Ms. Olatoye said that even as the number of employees working in the central office decreased by 13 percent over the past 10 years, health-care and pension costs rose by 70 percent over the same time. She said the agency budgeted \$705 million for “fringe” costs, which was 30 percent of its operating budget.

“The soaring costs of health care and pensions are a major obstacle to solvency, setting us up for a structural deficit year after year,” she said.

Local 237 spokesman Hank Sheinkopf said in an e-mail that she was wrong about the costs. “In fact her boss, Mayor de Blasio, just approved successful negotiations to reduce health-care costs for municipal workers,” he said. “NYCHA CEO union-buster, Olatoye, just can’t get her facts straight.”

