



INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS

NEWS from Fire Fighters

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International Association of Fire Fighters Files Federal Suit On Behalf of Local Union Leaders Fired By Mehlville Fire Protection District

Washington, DC – The International Association of Fire Fighters today filed a federal court action on behalf of IAFF Local 1889 President Bob Strinni and Local 1889 Secretary Jeri Fleschert, who were fired for exercising their free-speech rights and their involvement in the union.

The Mehlville Fire Protection District fired Fleschert, who worked at the Fire District for 23 years, and Strinni, a fire engineer for 14 years, despite their excellent employment records.

Labor-management relations between Local 1889 and the Fire District began to erode when Aaron Hilmer took over as chairman of the Fire District's board of directors. Under Hilmer, negotiations over a new labor agreement proved contentious and protracted, and the District has refused to accept a new labor contract with fire fighters for the last six years.

As the two principal officers of Local 1889, Strinni and Fleschert spoke out about issues of concern to fire fighters and the public, while also trying to move contract negotiations forward.

Beginning in April 2008, it became evident that Hilmer and District board members Bonnie Stegman and Ed Ryan were focused on breaking the fire fighters union and firing Strinni and Fleschert. The board directed that the District's employees would no longer be able to have their association dues voluntarily deducted from their paychecks and deposited in the account of their local union.

On April 22, 2008, District board members launched an investigation into what was vaguely described as "personnel issues" and "harassment." They ordered that any workers not complying with the investigation would face discipline and termination. The next day – before the investigation began – Strinni and Fleschert were suspended from work due to an unspecified "employment matter." Strinni and Fleschert were then banned from the fire stations and other District property.

Written requests from the IAFF to District officials requesting reasons for the suspensions and the nature of the investigation were ignored. In an April 30, 2008 article in the local newspaper, Chairman Hilmer was quoted as threatening that there would be a "massive shakeup" in the District's fire department.

Although the investigation produced no significant evidence of harassment, and without any findings or charges, Strinni and Fleschert were then suspended *without pay*. Incredibly, without any explanation, Hilmer sent one-sentence letters on June 16, 2008, to Strinni and Fleschert stating: "You have been terminated by the Board of Directors for violation of the District anti-harassment policy."

Strinni and Fleschert had their careers taken away from them, and the Fire District and its citizens lost 37 years of experience.

The complaint filed in federal court, which also names as defendants the three members of the District's board and Chief James Silvernail, details how these firings were illegal retaliation against the elected officers of Local 1889 because of their union leadership activities and because they engaged in free speech on behalf of the members and out of public concern.

"The IAFF cannot stand on the sidelines while two of our affiliate officers and excellent employees are discharged for pretextual and unlawful reasons. We are committed to supporting Bob Strinni and Jeri Fleschert until justice is achieved," IAFF General President Harold A. Schaitberger said.

The International Association of Fire Fighters, headquartered in Washington, DC, represents more than 290,000 full-time professional fire fighters and paramedics who protect 85 percent of the nation's population. More information is available at www.iaff.org

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