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Public Employee Press

Ground Zero Safety

DC 37 hits city with legal charges

By MOLLY CHARBONEAU

DC 37 took two significant legal actions last month to press the city to strengthen safeguards for members who work at or near the World Trade Center disaster site and related locations.

"Nothing could be more important than our members' health and safety," said District Council 37 Deputy Administrator Zachary Ramsey. "We want to make sure no more members are put in harm's way by this catastrophe." Mr. Ramsey chairs the Executive Board's Action Committee on safety and health, which pushed for the legal actions.

On Dec. 6, DC 37 filed improper labor practice charges against the city with the impartial Office of Collective Bargaining. The charge claims management has violated contracts and the collective bargaining law by refusing to provide information the union needs to protect the many hundreds of members who have worked on rescue, recovery and cleanup of the Twin Towers site.

And the next day the union filed a related Step III grievance accusing the city of violating safety provisions of the citywide contract.

"Those who worked or continue to work at Ground Zero were and may continue to be exposed to various toxins and other dangerous working conditions," the improper practice petition charged.

Union demands information

A DC 37 delegation led by Deputy Administrator Dennis Sullivan had pressed the issue of Ground Zero safety Nov. 9 at a meeting with city representatives. The union demanded a list of all members who have worked at the site or in related sites or operations, copies of emergency evacuation procedures for every location citywide where members work, and results of all on-going air quality and environmental testing of nearby buildings where members work. When the city failed to provide this crucial information, the union filed its charges.

The mass grievance hits the city for not providing "adequate, clean, structurally safe and sanitary working facilities" for members working at ground zero, at the Fresh Kills landfill, or transporting debris between those sites. The union charges that the city failed to provide medical monitoring of members working in those operations.

Meanwhile, a task force of DC 37, other unions and occupational health experts says government safety agencies must do a better job of protecting workers from World Trade Center hazards and biological threats such as anthrax.

"We will be meeting with federal and state agencies and demanding better enforcement of safety and health standards," said Lee Clarke, head of DC 37's Safety and Health Dept.

"These agencies have a responsibility to protect our members, and we intend to hold them accountable," she added. The unions plan to meet as a group with representatives of the state Public Employee Safety and Health Unit and the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration.