



Labor Dispute in an Odd Setting

By DAVID ROHDE
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Nonprofit legal services corporations are well known for championing the causes of those with grievances against government or corporations. But in an unusual case, Bedford-Stuyvesant Legal Services Corporation is being investigated by the Government for unfair labor practices.

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The Brooklyn regional office of the National Labor Relations Board has set a hearing for April 28 on an employee's complaint that the legal services organization attempted to thwart union activities there.

In the complaint, Jeffrey S. Busch, a staff attorney who is the office's union representative, said the office's director, Cherie Gaines, forced him to move into the office next to her in January 1996 and "engaged in surveillance" of union activities, and that Mr. Busch was subjected to verbal and written ridicule and poor performance reviews because of his union work, among other charges.

The complaint also charged that a supervisor, Norberto Delvalle, told employees that their offices would be converted into a library if they "joined, supported, or assisted the union, or if they filed charges and gave testimony." An investigation by the labor relations board concluded that the charges had merit and ordered the hearing.

Ms. Gaines, who has run Bedford-Stuyvesant Legal Services since 1988, denied the charges. "Mr. Busch has received letters of warnings because he engaged in conduct that deserved them," she said. "This office has engaged in no discrimination against union representatives, but it has enforced its standards regardless of union status." Mr. Busch would not comment on the charges.

Howard Baum, president of the Legal Services Staff Association, whose union represents about 250 lawyers and legal workers, said the problems in the Bedford-Stuyvesant project were indicative of the poor treatment of employees in the city's seven nonprofit legal services projects operating under the auspices of Legal Services of New York City.

"There are certain programs where the project directors are very hostile to any union activities," he said. "Ultimately, the people who suffer are the clients in the neighborhood."

Dale S. Johnson, the executive director of Legal Services of New York City, said disputes arise in offices, but individuals affiliated with the union are not targeted. "I would be hesitant to say the actions taken in these legal offices are in retaliation for union activities," he said. "It's something I would not tolerate."

The union has filed complaints with the labor relations board in the past, but Mr. Baum said the Busch case was the first in which the board decided to press charges since at least 1993. Alvin Blyer, the board's Brooklyn regional director, said complaints of unfair labor practices being filed against groups traditionally viewed as supporting unions -- like nonprofit legal aid groups or even unions themselves -- are rare but not unprecedented in New York.

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"You'd be surprised how unions react when their own employees attempt to organize," Mr. Blyer said. DAVID ROHDE

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