

FIRST ROUND TO FIREFIGHTERS AS COURT INJUNCTION HALTS LAYOFFS



25 New London firefighters scheduled to lose their jobs from the evening of Tuesday, are safe for now with a Superior Court judge halting the layoffs face of the union's request for a court injunction. "We've been directed by the Mayor to continue with the status quo," Fire Chief Ronald Samul said Tuesday, "For how long, I don't know," he added. "Today's been a long day." Had the judge not suspended the firefighter's layoffs, the city's fire department would have lost more than one-third of their workers. The decision to lay off the firefighters was made Monday night. The New London City Council after deliberations had decided to layoff the fire fighters rather than accept a concession agreement that would have reduced compulsory staffing levels on each shift and eradicated two planned raises in exchange for keeping the jobs. Mayor Daryl Finizio and the city council have been at loggerheads for months over the fire department's \$8.9 million budget. On Monday night the council tabled a cautious concession made with the intention of saving the jobs that were on the line. Amongst the fire fighters proposed to be laid off was Alfred Mayo, who has the distinction of becoming the first African-American hired by the department in over three decades. He had lost his job last December but had to be reinstated when it was proved that the fire department had racially discriminated against him. "I just think it's another chapter in the book of craziness, but it's a good day today we get to go back to work," Mayo said on Tuesday. Twice fired and twice rehired Mayo must now be believing in miracles. He said that the trial and tribulation that he went through were a strain for him and his family. Moreover, he said, that he had till date not received the back pay he was assured he would get when he was first rehired. He however, said that he would go through the whole ordeal again if required to, "I would," he said. "This is what I fought so hard for. What I fought so hard for was for right and wrong. Right prevailed. This is what I want to do. I want to spend my whole career doing this, and, God willing, I'll get my opportunity." The firefighters had been asked to hand over their equipment and badges by Tuesday evening, when they learnt, much to their relief, of their reprieve. As they were preparing to leave, Battalion Chief Thomas Curcio, standing in the doorway of the station, proclaimed the good news, "The union has filed for an injunction," "Al, you're coming to work," he said to Alfred Mayo, the Afro-American who was losing his job for the second time, "The layoffs are rescinded. We just heard, and now we're trying to get hold of people." The contract dispute involving the mayor, the city council and the firefighters union has been going for well-nigh a month now. "It's unfortunate the way things panned out, but we've gotta do what we've gotta do to protect our members," said Rocco Basilica, head of the New London Firefighters Union Local 1522. However, the council decision to make a concession and not to act, forced the Mayor's hand who was left with two very difficult choices, either follow throughout on his threat to lay off the firefighters, which would have depleted the department by almost 40 percent or he would have to set new deadlines, beyond his self-imposed deadlines, to make budget cuts. His chief of staff, Jane Glover clarified that the Mayor's deferment of the layoffs is "day to day." The court has yet to take action on the firefighter's injunction request, she said. "We're waiting to see what action the union is taking," she said. "We're not in a hurry to lay people off. If the union has legal action it can take, we wouldn't stand in their way." Deputy Fire Chief Henry Kydd, a 34-year old old-timer of the department said that wiser counsel should prevail and that such a situation had never occurred in the department earlier. He told that the layoffs would mean extra work for those that remained and could put people lives and properties in peril or grossly reducing response timings to emergencies. "You guys need to rethink and focus on what's right for the City of New London and what's right to protect the citizens of the city," he advised. Finizio said he will respect the court injunction, if one comes, but said that this does not resolve the budget shortfall problem, that was the prime cause of this conflict.