

Member File Class Action Suit Against United Steelworkers Union

St. Croix- The indignation among local union members that has been mounting since Aug. 31, when United Steelworkers of America officials asked local president David Maynard to step down, erupted Tuesday when nearly 90 members filed a class action law-suit in federal court charging the Steelworkers International and its local union administration with intimidation, discrimination and deprivation of union rights.

The complaint, filed in District Court, seeks to prohibit international officials and local officials and the local union administration from "interfering" with the governance of Local 8248 and seeks to reinstate Maynard.

"For many years, the defendants have engaged in a conspiracy to mislead, deceive, confuse and intimidate the plaintiffs and other governmental agencies which bear the responsibility for administering the labor laws in the territory and on the national level," the complaint reads.

It also accuses Steelworkers International officials of retaliating against local members' grievances and coercing local business to fire union members who sought grievances. Among the companies local members are claiming the union influences are Hess Oil Virgin Islands Corp, and its successor, HOVENSA; Jacobs Engineering Inc; and St. Croix Basic Inc.

Christiansted attorney Michael Sanford, representing the St. Croix Steelworkers local union administration, said Tuesday afternoon he had not yet read the complaint. The local administration, led by Sub district Director Frederick Joseph, oversees four Steelworkers chapters on St. Croix, the largest of which is Local 8248.

That chapter's approximately 2,000 members include workers at HOVENSA, St. Croix Alumina, Virgin Islands Telephone Corp, and in the local government. Repeated calls to Joseph on Monday and Tuesday were not returned and attempts to reach representatives of the companies named in the suit were unsuccessful.

Steelworkers attorney David Jury, reached at Steelworkers headquarters in Pittsburgh, Pa., said he did not know the complaint was pending and did not know it had been filed.

"As I have not seen the complaint I have no comment," he said.

The lawsuit has been in the works since the Steelworkers' International officials announced on Aug. 31 at a press conference that they were asking Maynard to resign. Steelworkers district Director Homer Wilson and International Vice President Leon Lynch said they had learned in June that Maynard had been convicted of embezzling money from a St. Croix businessman in 1994. Steelworkers by laws prohibit convicted felons from holding office and, they said, that gave them no choice but to ask Maynard to resign.

Maynard said union officials knew about his record when they hired him as a field worker in 1998. At the time, he was part-way through a five-year sentence at the Golden Grove Correctional Facility.

“When Frederick Joseph hired me, I was doing weekends in jail,” Maynard said Tuesday.

Sanford said an exhaustive search of local court records turned up nothing concrete before the April election, and he said union officials chose to ignore “heresy and innuendo” about Maynard.

The disagreements between local and international officials have resulted in a separate court battle about the union headquarters in Estate Whim.

Last Wednesday, Joseph and Sanford filed a complaint in Territorial Court asking the court to order Maynard to hand over the keys to the building. Maynard changed the locks after he was asked to step down. He did that because the locks would have been changed on him, said Maynard’s attorney, Lydia Logie Moolenaar. She said Joseph retaliated by cutting off the phone and electricity and firing the secretary, Raquel Nieves.

Sanford said that according to the Steelworkers’ constitution, the building’s contents are supposed to be administered by the sub-district director and that Josephs merely wanted access to the paperwork inside the building. The building is owned by local 8248 members, Moolenaar said.

“Pursuant to the administrator-ship, they are required to perform certain functions which they cannot do because David Maynard has refused to leave the building,” Sanford said Tuesday. “We want a court order saying Maynard is not supposed to be there.”

The case is in Territorial Court today at 11 a.m., Moolenaar said.

Despite his being at the forefront of the battle between local and international officials, Maynard said neither the standoff over union headquarters nor the class action lawsuit is an attempt on his part to keep his job.

“All I’m trying to prove is that they knew about my record,” he said.

Maynard said the class action suit is a reflection of the discontent union members were feeling long before he was asked to step down. He said that once he and former Local 8248 President Lloyd Daley began fighting too hard for local members’ rights, international officials squeezed them out.

Daley, whose son, Timothy embezzled more than \$11,000 from the local union, stepped down in 1998.

Maynard said the international’s union officials urged him to run for election because they thought he could defeat Daley’s supporters.

Frederiksted attorney Ronald Russell, who is representing the class action defendants along with attorney Marshall Webster, said many local union members have long-standing grievances against the international union.

Russell said international officials “misinformed” the local membership about Daley.

“The international had demonstrated what we consider a pattern of disenfranchising the membership here,” Russell said. “That’s why Daley was unpopular with the membership.”

Now, Maynard’s and Daley’s names are side by side at the top of the class action suit.

“I guess Daley and I had the same thing happen to us,” Maynard said.

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