

The Fairness Center

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Lawsuit: Hartford County Nurse Defends Constitutional Rights From Union Officials' Abuse

Seeks Return of Funds in Multi-year Union Money Grab

October 30, 2018, New Haven, Ct. – Imagine being forced to financially support something that violates your most fundamental beliefs. Cheryl Spano Lonis faced that reality after union officials took thousands of dollars from her paychecks to fill their coffers over the course of the last three years without her consent.

Spano Lonis filed a lawsuit against New England Health Care Employees Union, District 1199, SEIU (SEIU 1199NE) to regain her money and hold union bureaucrats accountable for violating her constitutional rights.

In October 2015, Spano Lonis, a 19-year veteran nurse practitioner in the Connecticut Department of Corrections, determined that, because of her religious beliefs, she must resign from her union, SEIU 1199NE. Her objective was to stop financially supporting union activities that violated her sincerely and closely held beliefs, as is her right under the union's contract with the state. The contract allows a non-union member employee objecting on religious grounds to instead donate an amount equivalent to union dues to charity.

“Union officials treated me like an ATM,” commented Spano Lonis. “They ignored their own rules, violated my rights, and misused my money. I did everything I could to ensure my money wasn't used by union officials for purposes that violate my moral and religious beliefs.”

But SEIU 1199NE officials ignored her resignation for nearly three years, continued deducting full union dues from her paycheck during that time, and blocked thousands of dollars in charitable contributions.

Moreover, union officials failed to provide Spano Lonis with notices that were at that time legally required by the U.S. Supreme Court, instead leaving her in the dark about her membership status and using her money, in part, for purposes contrary to her religious beliefs.

“Forced membership in SEIU 1199NE violated Ms. Spano Lonis' First Amendment rights of association and speech,” commented Nathan McGrath, Vice President & Director of Litigation of the Fairness Center. “Ms. Spano Lonis' choice to resign from the union should have been respected and her union fees directed to a charity, as she had intended and as was her right.”

Only after the U.S. Supreme Court's June decision in *Janus v. AFSCME, Council 31*, did SEIU 1199NE officials confirm Spano Lonis' resignation and stop withholding dues from her paycheck. The prior money deducted from her paycheck was never returned to her or donated to charity.

To recover the nearly three years' worth of improperly withheld money and protect her constitutional rights, Spano Lonis enlisted the help of the Fairness Center, a nonprofit public interest law firm that offers free legal services to those hurt by public employee union officials.

The case was filed in federal court in the District of Connecticut on October 27, 2018.

Documents:

- [Complaint](#)

Fairness Center Vice President Nathan McGrath is available for comment. Contact Conner Drigotas at 844.293.1001 or cddrigotas@fairnesscenter.org to schedule an interview.

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The Fairness Center is a nonprofit public interest law firm offering free legal services to those hurt by public employee union officials. Fairness Center attorneys provide clients with a voice in the court of law and the court of public opinion. For more information visit www.FairnessCenter.org.