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CSEA sues Astorino over Section 8 layoffs

Westchester's largest union filed suit Friday, saying County Executive Rob Astorino wrongly fired dozens of workers managing a housing program for low-income people.

Civil Service Employees Association, which includes roughly 4,000 county workers, filed the lawsuit in state **Supreme Court**. It claims the county executive didn't have the authority to ax 38 workers with the Section 8 program after the Board of Legislators brought back those positions during the budget process.

They want the program and jobs restored — with back pay and benefits.

"He ignored the law that created the budget and went off on his own," Steven Crain, an Albany-based attorney with CSEA, said of Astorino. "He doesn't have the authority to act on his own when the Legislature approved the program."

The Astorino administration had no immediate comment and said it would review the lawsuit over the weekend. The suit also names the Board of Legislators and the state's Housing Trust **Fund Corporation**, though Crain said he expected that the county board "is going to be on our side."

While the claim was expected, it's the latest in recurring friction over the county executive's authority to change programs already approved by the county board. The board, along with two Mount Vernon mothers, last year sued Astorino over his cuts to day-care **funding**. That matter is pending.

Leading up to Astorino's budget announcement in November, he canceled the Section 8 Housing Voucher Program contract with the state on the grounds that it cost more than the \$4 million provided by the state. He has said that the program will continue but simply won't be run through the county.

The board later restored most of the jobs, but Astorino vetoed those line items among hundreds of others. Democrats overrode those vetoes, and the county executive eventually laid off the workers, citing a lack of contract or work to do. In a bit of political maneuvering, though, the board's appointments committee earlier this week rejected Astorino's pick for planning commissioner, Ed Buroughs. They cited the divide over Section 8 as the main reason.

Challenging a county executive's authority isn't unprecedented. In 1999, a few hundred CSEA workers won a class-action suit against County Executive Andrew O'Rourke after housekeeping and laundry positions were farmed out to the private sector. Workers received thousands of dollars in back pay and interest.

This suit comes as the county executive is pushing to have all union workers contribute to their **health care coverage**. He also asked CSEA workers to forgo 4 percent raises, a request they

declined because they have a contract through the end of the year.

This fight is a microcosm of what's happening nationwide: Public unions are facing challenges and, in some cases, resentment as some leaders and the public blame them for fiscal challenges facing states, counties and municipalities.

Section 8, which provides subsidies to landlords that enable low-income tenants to live in units that would be too expensive, is a federal program through the Department of Housing and Urban Development that is managed by states, municipalities and housing authorities.

Westchester has run the program since 1975. Its contract involved roughly 4,500 of the county's 11,000 housing vouchers.

Board of Legislators Chairman Ken Jenkins, D- Yonkers, wouldn't comment on the suit because the board had not yet been served, but he said its actions show that it supports the program. "We voted on this twice," he said. "We know exactly where we stand on this."