

Sen. Van Wanggaard: Milwaukee Mayor attempts to silence police union's first amendment rights

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MADISON – State legislators are expressing outrage that the leaders of the Milwaukee Police Association (MPA) were threatened with potential termination for exercising their first amendment rights on a bill before the state legislature.

“This is a cynical, despicable attempt by the mayor’s office to silence their law enforcement officials and punish them for speaking their mind,” said Senator Van Wanggaard (R-Racine). “I can’t believe the mayor is so desperate to keep his thumb on the police department that he is actually threatening the union for disagreeing with his appointees.”

The letter, from Mayor Tom Barrett’s Department of Employee Relations, states that the city will enforce a provision in the union contract which prohibits the questioning of, interfering with, or infringing upon the power of the Chief of Police or the Milwaukee Fire & Police Commission (MFPC). This provision has not been enforced in recent memory, including at least the last 22 years. Recently, MPA leadership has been supporting a bill in the state legislature that would increase transparency, independence of the MFPC. Receipt of this letter prevented at least two individuals from testifying before the state legislature.

“This is an insult to our first responders’ First Amendment rights,” said

Representative Janel

Brandtjen (R-Menomonee Falls). “It is unconscionable that the Milwaukee Mayor would attempt to intimidate our police officer and fire fighters in this way. He’s attempting to deny them their voice on a bill that would give them a voice on the Fire and Police Commission.”

A member of Mayor Barrett’s cabinet, Labor Negotiator Nicole Fleck sent a letter in late

December to MPA leadership stating that Milwaukee “intends to enforce Article 49... regardless of past enforcement (or lack thereof)…” The timing of this unprecedented letter is particularly troubling as the State Senate and State Assembly is debating legislation increasing the autonomy and transparency of the MFPC. The Milwaukee Police Association and Milwaukee Professional Fire Fighters Association are among those advocating for the bill.

The bill also makes changes to Police and Fire Commissions across the state. To the legislators’ knowledge, no community in the state except Milwaukee had made a similar threat of action against people exercising their First Amendment rights. Assembly Bill 606 had a public hearing in the State Assembly last week. A hearing on the Senate companion bill, SB 512, is anticipated soon.