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Only 9 members take advantage of provision in union contracts

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) - Only nine workers have claimed exemptions since a labor agreement 10 months ago allowed state employees who object to union activities on religious grounds to donate dues to charity, state records show.

They are among the 42,000 union members who won that right in September, after Environmental Protection Agency employee Greg Greenwood objected to paying dues to the Ohio Civil Service Employees Association because he believed the union supported abortion rights and same-sex marriages.

Previously, members of Ohio's public-employee unions who had religious objections were permitted to donate their dues to their church, but Greenwood had no church to which to make a donation. A settlement was reached between the OCSEA and U.S. labor agencies that allows objecting members to donate to any charity.

Two other state-employee unions - the Ohio Education Association and the Service Employees International Union-1199 - agreed to the settlement. The OEA represents about 700 workers in state libraries and prisons and the SEIU has about 4,200 social workers, doctors, dentists, psychologists, parole officers and other state employees. The OCSEA, the state's largest public workers union, represents about 37,000 employees.

Since the Greenwood case was resolved, 12 state workers have applied for the exemption, according to Department of Administrative Services records. Nine were approved, one was denied, one is pending and one was withdrawn.

The agreement came after the U.S. Justice Department sued the state and OCSEA alleging religious discrimination against Greenwood. The case was supported by the anti-union National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, a Springfield, Va.-based nonprofit group.

The OCSEA was required to post details of the agreement on its Web site, union spokesman Peter Wray said. The procedure for diverting dues to charity also is available on the state's Administrative Services' Web site.

Wray said the union occasionally fields calls about agreement, but most members seem

satisfied that all union workers are paying their fair share, even if the union isn't getting some of the money.

'When Greenwood first surfaced there was confusion among some of our folks,' Wray said. 'Then, as they understood they were diverting their dues to a charity organization, that eased their concerns.'

Justin Hakes, legal information director for the right-to-work group, said the union could have done more to inform its members of the settlement but acknowledged it was not required to do so.

'A lot of people out there don't even know about it. Union officials commonly do not inform workers of their rights,' Hakes said.

Hakes' group is involved in cases similar to Greenwood's in four other states. In June, a federal judge in Columbus ruled in a separate case that a state employee whose religious beliefs conflict with the political positions of their labor union cannot be forced to pay dues.

Wray said the resolution of Greenwood's case was unnecessarily difficult.

'Had there not been the National Right to Work, this would have been easily taken care of. Some of the parties involved were more interested in headlines,' he said.

On the Net:

Ohio Civil Service Employees Association: <http://www.ocsea.org>

National Right to Work: <http://www.nrtw.org>