

Ex-forest workers blast job 'reform'

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A reform move at the Cook County Forest Preserves has been twisted into a way for the county to replace longtime workers with "clout" hires, former workers allege.

The only difference between the politically connected new hires and the workers with close to 10 years' experience who were let go is that the new hires had taken a three-day training course in setting controlled forest fires that the other workers had tried to sign up for but were told was unavailable, they said.

The former workers say there is no reform that Forest Preserve District political bosses can't convert into an anti-reform.

The controversy stems from the county creating a new job category of "resource technician," with an expertise in forestry, and phasing out the old category of "woodsman," which focused on cutting trees and grass. Forest Preserve District bosses created the new position in response to environmentalists' concerns.

"They were supposed to be able to do ecosystem restorations," said Steve Packard of the Friends of the Forest Preserves.

"They needed to have training with chain saws, have a herbicide license, be trained in controlled burning. It was all very positive because the district has so much catch-up to do compared to other districts."

The change coincided with layoffs that the district announced to plug a \$20 million deficit. Despite criticism from some commissioners, the county laid off about 100 laborers, woodsmen and other workers instead of top management that commissioners accused of causing the deficit.

Under union contracts, workers with the least seniority were to be laid off first.

In January 2003, Carl Lewis, Jon Gibson and another longtime Forest Preserve District employee, Herman Morrow, reported for duty as woodsmen and told supervisor Tim Carroll they wanted to be trained

to handle controlled burns and pesticides/herbicides so they could qualify for the new "resource technician" positions, they said.

Unknown to them, the burn class was to be held Feb. 26, 27 and 28, 2003. They had periodically asked Carroll whether any class was to be held, and he told them he had no knowledge, they said.

Carroll declined to be interviewed. Forest Preserve District spokesman Steve Mayberry said all employees were offered training.

On Feb. 25, a day before the training was to be held, another employee recalled Carroll telling him, "We're going to send you to fire training, but don't tell nobody. Keep it to yourself."

That employee, who asked to remain anonymous, had already decided he was going to retire and opted not to go to the training.

But Lewis, Gibson and Morrow, who had asked for the training, said they were never told about it. Someone left a flier for the training on Gibson's windshield after it was over. They then realized that Carroll had been out of the office those three days.

Class attendance records confirm that Carroll received the three days of training. Also getting the training was Marvin Coleman, who had been hired eight years after Lewis, Gibson and Morrow, the attendance records show. Coleman had been laid off by the Forest Preserve District under the seniority rule, but a supervisor told him before he was laid off that he would be rehired April 1, Gibson recalled Coleman telling him.

On April 1, Lewis, Gibson and Morrow were laid off. Coleman was hired back on.

Mayberry, the Forest Preserves' spokesman, insisted that nobody from the Forest Preserve District told Coleman about the training. "Mr. Coleman found the information online, at the Chicago Wilderness Web site," Mayberry said.

But Lewis, Morrow and Gibson said they suspect the real reason is that Coleman and the other less-senior employees who were quietly trained and hired back had more clout than they did. The politicians who originally helped Lewis, Morrow and Gibson get their Forest Preserve District jobs had fallen from power.

All three men filed grievances through their Teamsters union local and also through the state's Department of Human Rights. Gibson's case has been dismissed, clearing him to file a lawsuit, which he said he is considering. Morrow is also considering a lawsuit.