

## Food services union takes aim at ed chairman

By **DAVID HINCHEY**

**Chronicle Staff Writer What:** A public forum on the proposal to contract cafeteria services within Windham Public Schools.

**When:** Tuesday at 7 p.m.

**Where:** Windham Middle School auditorium, 123 Quarry St.

WILLIMANTIC — The union representing Windham school cafeteria food service workers today alleged a potential conflict of interest involving the possible switch in cafeteria services.

Matthew O'Connor, communications director of the Connecticut State Employees Association/Service Employees International Union, said the union was prepared to file a complaint with the Windham ethics board against board of education Chairman Kenneth Folan.

The CSEA/SEIU blog alleges Folan has the appearance of a conflict of interest because he works as a salesman for U. S. Service Corp., the nation's second- largest distributor of food products and related supplies.

A public forum on the proposal to contract out food services is scheduled for a public forum Tuesday at 7 p.m. at Windham Middle School.

The board of education will meet following the forum to possibly act on the proposal.

The blog on the web site said U.S. Food Service's customers are vendors contracted by institutions, including hundreds of school districts in the **(Union, Page 4)**

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Northeast.

"We are concerned that contracting- out Windham's food services is really about benefiting his employer, rather than his constituents," according to the union blog.

O'Connor said the union hopes the ethics board will hear the concerns and investigate the complaint.

In the meantime, a proposal to contract out food services will be looked at closely and questions board of education members might have will be answered.

O'Connor said the proposal to contract out food services has been "rammed down the throats" of members of the board of education, who are meeting Tuesday following the public forum.

Folan, however, blasted the allegations, especially since the firm the board could hire — if it approves contracting out food services — is not the firm he works for.

School board members have indicated they would vote to hire Maryland-based Sodexo if they opt to outsource food services.

"There is no connection," Folan said, adding he told union staff representative George Gould and the local union president about his position and they both know there is no conflict of interest.

Folan said the union was "shooting blanks into a dark sky" and the complaint was "yet another union tactic."

"This is my personal life," Folan said, adding the union has "crossed the line."

Folan said the allegations will bring the union "nothing but legal trouble" for them.

"That's how upset I am," Folan said this morning.

He said the CSEA/SEIU is more concerned about losing a bargaining unit and has done a good job spreading "half truths" and "innuendo" to scare its members.

Folan said the allegations were a "last-ditch effort" to "mar his name" and he has never profited from being board of education chairman and a salesman.

He said if he were to vote for Sodexo, the company recommended by the board of education subcommittee, it would actually be a vote to support one of U.S. Food Service's competitors.

Folan said in discussions with companies interested in providing food services, school administrators have looked out for the interest of the workers to make sure they would be getting the same salary and benefits they have now.

"To my knowledge that's been done," he said, adding education officials were looking for "apples to apples" comparisons.

Folan said if a switch were to be made, it would save money which would free up resources for programs and staffing.

Sodexo has guaranteed a \$141,000 savings the first year.

The food service battle has gone on since March, when union members urged the board not to investigate outsourcing district food services.

The board did put out a request for proposals, which companies responded to, with Sodexo being named as one of the finalists brought forward by the subcommittee.

The board of education met in an executive session last week on the proposal and union membership spoke during the public comment portion of the regular meeting to voice disapproval.

Last week, Deborah Dubord, president of the Connecticut State Employees Association Service Employees International Union Local 2001, the local chapter that represents 31 food service employees, delivered a petition signed by more than 1,000 residents who oppose "outsourcing" Windham public schools' cafeteria services.

"We are concerned because outside private vendors often cut corners in food quality, nutrition and service to squeeze profits out of the meals they serve our kids," she said at the meeting. "We can't be sure profit-motivated contractors won't import unsafe food from China into our schools to cut their bottom line."

Dubord, who is an assistant manager of food services at Windham Middle School, said the current food service staff is committed to working for the district and serving the students.