

# Union: Arbitrator Ruling a Victory for Massachusetts Troopers Over “Tyranny”

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The president of the State Police union took a victory lap Monday morning after an arbitrator ruled in favor of seven troopers who had remained on unpaid leave after claiming a religious exemption from mandated COVID-19 vaccination two years ago.

Against a backdrop of the State House with the governor’s office over his shoulder, State Police Association of Massachusetts President Patrick McNamara celebrated a win over “tyranny” and what he termed “Charlie Baker’s Draconian executive order” requiring vaccinations for executive branch employees. Gov. Maura Healey rescinded Baker’s vaccination policy for most state employees in May.

“Many of these brave men and women standing with us today were found to have sincerely held religious beliefs that were not only violated by Baker, but treated with disdain, ridicule, and ultimately suspended without pay,” McNamara said.

Independent arbitrator Bonnie McSpiritt ruled Friday that the Department of State Police violated anti-discrimination sections of the union members’ contract “when it denied the religious exemption requests of the eight State Police Association of Massachusetts members who [the department] determined had [a sincerely held religious belief], but then asserted it could not accommodate them because of undue hardship.”

Seven troopers – Paul Aten, Jessie Barbosa, Christopher Dolan,

David Hanafin, Joseph Hanafin, Patrick Irwin, and Lance Reed – now have a two-week window to decide whether they want to return to work at the agency, where McSpiritt directed they are able to return to their previous positions and receive full back pay. The SPAM president said the seven were “still contemplating” their decision. An eighth officer covered by the case, Trooper First Class Luke Bonin, had already returned to work, according to the arbitration ruling. McSpiritt found he is also eligible for back pay from his suspension period.

McNamara cited the cases of 13 union members who were “terminated and labeled with a dishonorable discharge” related to the vaccine mandate and said the union’s efforts around the vaccine mandates are “far from finished.” Their separate arbitration case is coming up this fall, and attorney Leah Barrault said she was “confident” that “the outcome is going to be the same” for them. McNamara said “some” of the affected troopers were present at the press conference, but that under State Police policy they were not able to speak to the press.