

From the *Tallahassee Democrat*

Layoffs hearing resumes at FSU

BY DOUG BLACKBURN • DEMOCRAT SENIOR WRITER • PUBLISHED: JULY 19, 2010 2:00AM

Arbitrator Stanley Sergent is scheduled to resume hearing testimony on Tuesday in a thorny case between faculty and administrators at...

Arbitrator Stanley Sergent is scheduled to resume hearing testimony on Tuesday in a thorny case between faculty and administrators at Florida State University. Sergent listened in mid-May to two days of testimony from tenured faculty members who received layoff notices in 2009 in the wake of massive reductions in state revenue for FSU.

United Faculty of Florida, the union representing FSU faculty, contends that the layoffs violated the collective bargaining agreement between faculty and the administration. Betty Steffens, legal counsel for FSU, disagrees. "Our position remains we followed the United Faculty of Florida contract," she said. "It was regrettable. We had to make layoffs due to budget constraints."

On Tuesday, Sergent — who this time will be based at his home office in Sarasota, watching and listening by video conference — is scheduled to hear from at least four deans and FSU Provost Larry Abele. As was the case in May, there will be cross-examinations of witnesses.

It's possible the hearing — being held at the university's training center on Jackson Bluff Road — will last two days, and it may pick up again on Aug. 11 when Joseph Travis, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, is available to testify.

A decision isn't expected until September at the earliest, but Sergent's ruling could have ramifications across the state and nation.

While many universities have been forced to cope with difficult budgets, FSU is the only institution in the U.S. to lay off more than a dozen — 21, at the time the budget was passed in June 2009 — tenured faculty.

Jack Fiorito, president of FSU's faculty union, believes it's hard to overstate the importance of Sergent's ruling.

"It's a huge deal for the faculty," he said, "because if the administration has its way, tenure doesn't mean anything anymore."