



- NEWS**
- NZ News
 - Headlines
 - Dialogue
 - News Cartoon
- World News
- Business
- Money
- Technology
- Sports
- Entertainment
- Travel
- Features
- Weather
- Marine
- Employment
- Property
- Motoring
- News Toolbox**
 - News via email
 - News via PDA
 - XML Newsfeeds
 - Photo Sales
 - Feedback
 - Search Help

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- HERALD PROMOTIONS**
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Union barred from talking to lab staff

01.07.2004
By ANGELA GREGORY

An Auckland company which has banned workers from speaking anything but English is barring union representatives from entering the premises to offer help.

Fort Richards Laboratories has warned its staff they will be sacked if they speak foreign languages at work, even in the lunchroom.

The legality of the move has been questioned by employment law experts and the Human Rights Commission, but company director Maurice Clist is adamant his warning is lawful.

The Otahuhu company makes medical supplies used for disease diagnosis and Mr Clist has said the English-only rule is important for safety reasons.

After publicity on the issue, the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union tried to enter the premises to recruit any interested workers but was advised by Mr Clist's lawyer that the company had an exemption under section 24 of the Employment Relations Act.

That exemption is on the grounds of the employer being a member of a religious society or order whose doctrine or beliefs preclude membership of any other organisation or body.

It only applies where there are fewer than 20 workers who are employed by an individual, not a company.

A letter released to the Herald from the union to Fort Richards' lawyers says the union is seeking confirmation of the exemption from the chief executive of the Labour Department.

Union lawyer Helen White said in the letter that she was concerned the company was engaged in behaviour which was unjustified.

"As you will understand, if as I suspect the certificate was issued in error, then I intend to seek its revocation

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