

Kicked at the curb

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NINE SKYCAPS at Logan Airport won big last month when a federal jury ordered American Airlines to pay them a total of \$325,000 in lost tips. The verdict made sense: The skycaps say their tips suffered when, in 2005, the airline imposed a \$2 fee for each bag checked at the curbside. While customers were free to tip extra, many surely assumed the fee was in lieu of a tip.

But victory was short-lived. This week, the airline struck back, with a policy prohibiting its Logan skycaps from accepting tips at all. They got raises - most went from \$5.15 an hour to \$12 - but that is unlikely to make up for loss of tips. At worst, this is petty, mean-spirited retaliation. At best, it's the most convenient course for the airline - and one that just happens to hit a group of workers who stood up for themselves.

Though heard in federal court, the skycaps' case cited a Massachusetts tips law, which requires that charges billed as service fees be given directly to workers who provide the service. American says it complied by posting a disclaimer that the \$2 fee did not include gratuities. The airline is appealing the verdict.

By banning tipping and giving skycaps (most of whom work for third-party companies) wages above the state minimum, the airline hopes to avoid the tips law. "The only way to escape this complex and unique Massachusetts law," American spokesman Tim Smith said, "is to not be covered by it." The skycaps' lawyer, Shannon Liss-Riordan, says the new policy still violates the law.

The company has a better option: Lift the fee at Logan, and let the skycaps earn their tips as they always did. The airline insists that the \$2 bag fee is needed because it pays the labor costs of curbside check. In other words, at Logan, skycaps' wages will be carved out of what used to be their tips. The ever-declining world of air travel just got even coarser, and Logan's skycaps are much worse off.