Union talks revive for University of Alaska employees

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FAIRBANKS — A labor organization has revived a campaign to represent thousands of University of Alaska employees, five months after abandoning a previous unionization effort.

The Alaska State Employees Association asked UA officials for a roster of non-represented employees two weeks ago and will begin contacting workers in the months ahead to discuss unionization, ASEA business manager Jim Duncan said.

ASEA wants to represent about 2,500 unorganized UA employees throughout the state, a group that consists mostly of office workers. The workers are the only employee group in the UA system not represented by a labor union, and they voted to remain unorganized during the last unionization election in 1998.

It represents the second effort by ASEA in the past year to unionize those employees.

ASEA submitted more than 1,000 union authorization cards to the Alaska Labor Relations Agency in May, enough to trigger an election. The union abruptly withdrew its petition about a month before a scheduled October election, saying that it needed more time to meet with employees and counter an anti-union message from UA officials.

UA spokeswoman Kate Ripley said there is no policy opposing the unionization efforts. She said the UA administration simply wants its workers to be informed and to participate if an election is eventually held.

“Ultimately, it’s (the employees’) decision,” Ripley said. “We just want them to have all the facts.”

Duncan said the second campaign will be better prepared and will focus on “ground-level” organizing.

“We’re building a real strong base and evaluating our level of support,” Duncan said.

Beth Behner, the chief human resources officer at UA, posted a memo to employees last month stating she had provided a roster of non-represented employees to ASEA on Jan. 19. She said the request for the list — which UA is legally required to provide — was the first contact UA has had since the union withdrew its petition last September.

Duncan said ASEA officials will likely begin collecting authorization cards within the next few months if they get a positive response during meetings with employees.
Because ASEA withdrew its previous petition, the union must now restart the process from the beginning. A union needs to collect authorization cards from at least 30 percent of the workers in a proposed bargaining unit to trigger an election.

In the memo, Behner said employees who previously signed authorization cards can expect that ASEA will be persistent in the months ahead. The memo said employees are under no obligation to sign again and included information for people who don’t wish to be contacted by union representatives in the future.

“The university cannot control the union’s actions but believes the union should honor requests to be left alone,” Behner said.

The process has been a long one for the ASEA, UA and its employees.

For the first half of 2010 the ASEA and another local union, the Alaska Public Employees Association, were in a furious competition to sign up workers. The battle ended when an arbiter with the AFL-CIO — the organization that oversees both unions — ruled that the ASEA had exclusive rights to organize UA workers until May 31.

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