University of Alaska union organizer charged with fraud

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FAIRBANKS — A labor organizer and an assistant attorney general who were caught shoplifting hundreds of dollars worth of shoes last year are facing new charges related to an alleged 2010 fraud to exaggerate the number of University of Alaska employees wishing to unionize.

The labor organizer, Skye Rubadeau McRoberts, 31, is accused of filing forged interest cards in the name of university employees, possibly for as many as several hundred employees. The interest cards are used to determine if the employees will vote on whether to unionize. If 30 percent of workers sign cards then the union can petition for an election.

In addition to receiving credit as the manager of the organizing campaign, prosecutors say McRoberts stood to enrich herself if a union vote went through because she owned a mailing service the union used that would have profited by the increase in mail generated by an election. She is charged with two counts of felony forgery and two counts of falsifying business records, also a felony.

McRoberts’ friend, Erin A. Pohland, 31, former assistant attorney general, faces one misdemeanor count of official misconduct for allegedly failing to investigate or report her friend, even when the state’s labor regulatory agency sent multiple inquiries about suspicious interest cards.

The two women previously were arrested in January 2011 after a surveillance camera captured them loading a shopping cart with shoes and cutting off tags at an Anchorage Fred Meyer. They both pleaded guilty and received three years of probation.

The group McRoberts was trying to organize is a group of about 1,500 mostly office workers employed on different campuses around the state. McRoberts’ former employer, the Alaska State Employees Association still is trying to organize the same group.

ASEA Business Manager Jim Duncan, who signed some of the petitions prosecutors say included forged interest cards, said Sunday he never suspected some of the cards might be forged until Alaska State Troopers began investigating the case in August 2010.

He said he hopes the public will not judge the union, or union in general, based on the conduct of one person.

“The alleged activity is not the type of activity that the union condones,” he said “It’s surely not the type of activity that I condone.”

The union had qualified to have an election before she left, but withdrew its petition in September 2010 because of concerns that some interest cards might be forged, Duncan said. The new campaign began after she resigned in November.
2010.

“Anything we’re doing now is not tainted by Ms. McRoberts,” he said.

The current campaign he said is moving slowly and is less than halfway to the goal of having 30 percent of the employees sign the interest cards, he said.

At the Fairbanks campus, the group recently clashed with the university administrators when the campus post office returned mail the union had sent to hundreds of employees, because the university concluded they were insufficiently addressed to be delivered.

The investigation

According to the charging document filed last month against McRoberts and Pohland, troopers began investigating the case after a former ASEA employee reported possible fraud in August 2010. The employee, Jennifer Peterson, told troopers she was doing data entry for the union in February 2010 when she noticed several interest cards McRoberts gave her were written in purple ink and had similar handwriting.

McRoberts admitted forging the cards when confronted by Peterson, but told her no one would see the cards.

Peterson told troopers she was under personal pressure not to report her suspicions because she was in a relationship with McRoberts’ brother at the time. She waited until August, after spending the summer commercial fishing with him.

At Peterson’s suggestion, troopers investigated Grizzly Mail and Print, a business that received $120,000 from ASEA between 2007 and 2010, according to the complaint. The listed business owner recently had been transferred to McRoberts’ nanny, who told troopers she had signed the form, putting the business in her name because she did not want to lose her job. Troopers also said McRoberts previously hid the business behind the names of her husband and her brother.

A few months before troopers began investigating McRoberts, the Alaska Labor Relations Agency began its own investigation because of problems including similar signatures on the interest cards.

Three times during summer 2010, the agency brought the issue before Pohland at the attorney general’s office. Pohland did not tell the agency she was friends with McRoberts, and recommended against contacting law enforcement for suspected forgery, according to the complaint.

Troopers interviewed McRoberts in October, and said the interest cards were in fact from university employees interested in joining the union. The success of the unionization campaign helped ASEA win an arbitration hearing in March 2010 with a rival union that also wanted to organize the same group, she said.
McRoberts and Pohland are both scheduled to be arraigned early next month.

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