Unions fight to organize University of Alaska employees

by Jeff Richardson / jrichardson@newsminer.com

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FAIRBANKS — A pair of labor organizations are battling to represent most of the remaining nonunion employees at the University of Alaska.

Both the Alaska State Employees Association and the Alaska Public Employees Association have spent six months or more at UA’s various campuses, trying to recruit workers to sign union authorization cards. It’s the first step in a process that could end with a unionization vote later this spring.

The effort is mainly targeting office workers who serve as clerks, administrative assistants and support staff. Other UA employees, such as professors and maintenance workers, are already represented by unions.

The ASEA filed a petition with the Alaska Labor Relations Agency on Monday stating that it has collected enough union-authorization cards from eligible employees to trigger an election. Valid cards from at least 30 percent of the affected workers are needed for ASEA to be placed on the ballot as union representative.

ASEA Business Manager Jim Duncan, a former Democratic state senator from Juneau, said organizers have “significantly more” than that threshold, although the union declined to release a specific number. If the efforts proceed as ASEA hopes, Duncan said, an election is possible as soon as late April.

That hasn’t stopped another union, the APEA, from continuing its recruiting efforts. Even if ASEA is certified by the state, APEA could still claim enough cards to share the ballot in an upcoming union election.

“We hope to get to an eventual vote,” said APEA President Bruce Senko, of Fairbanks. “We hoped it would be just us, but so be it.”

Senko said he’s skeptical that ASEA organizers have collected enough cards to become certified. He said the rival union is hastily filing its petition simply to stake a claim as the leader in the race to represent UA employees.
“We think they filed just to say they filed,” he said.

It isn’t clear exactly how many UA employees could be affected by the unionization efforts. UA has about 2,700 nonunion employees, but Duncan said that figure includes people in management positions who wouldn’t be represented.

Duncan said ASEA believes there are 1,850-2,000 workers who are in positions they seek to unionize.

If both ASEA and APEA eventually make their way onto a ballot, a majority of voters would need to approve representation by one of the unions or decide to remain unorganized. If a three-choice ballot doesn’t result in a majority winner, a runoff election would be held between the two most popular options.

A previous effort to unionize UA office workers was made in 1998, but employees voted it down. Duncan said the argument for unionization is stronger today than it was then, because of a widening pay gap between UA workers and state employees in the same positions.

He said recruiting picked up in September, when the UA Board of Regents approved a new simplified salary grid that has been unpopular with some employees.

If UA wants to apply the same system to its unionized employees the change will need to be made through negotiation.

“I think that was the straw that broke the camel’s back,” Duncan said. “They were not getting the same treatment (as unionized employees).”

UA spokeswoman Kate Ripley said the university plans to stay out of the unionization discussion.

“We have a neutral position, and we don’t try to influence (employees) either way,” Ripley said.

Contact staff writer Jeff Richardson at 459-7518.