Unions battle over representing University of Alaska employees

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FAIRBANKS — A turf war between two labor unions trying to organize about 2,000 employees at the University of Alaska has gone to mediation.

Representatives from the Alaska State Employees Association and the Alaska Public Employees Association each traveled to Washington, D.C., last Thursday to argue that they should be allowed to push forward with organizing efforts.

The APEA says it had already staked a claim among University of Alaska employees. The APEA represents other workers on the state’s campuses, and it says efforts have been under way for the past year to organize most of the remaining non-union employees, which largely include office workers who are designated as classified staff.

The rival ASEA took the first formal step in the unionization process in February when it filed a petition with the Alaska Labor Relations Agency to be placed on a ballot as a union representative.

ASEA officials say they’ve collected signatures from the required 30 percent of eligible employees, although the verification of those signatures by the Alaska Labor Relations Agency has been put on hold while the mediation is pending. The AFL-CIO, a national federation of labor organizations that is affiliated with both APEA and ASEA, agreed to hear the dispute. An arbitrator is expected to rule by the end of the week that one or both of the unions can proceed with organizing.

University and APEA officials have also criticized ASEA’s approach for collecting some of its pledges. ASEA offered to enter card signers in a raffle with a prize of 25,000 Alaska Airlines miles, which drew formal complaints from both the university and the rival union.

ASEA business manager Jim Duncan said his union has agreed to donate the mileage to charity instead of including it in a raffle. UA still considers the signatures collected during the raffle promotion as “tainted cards” and has asked the state labor agency not to consider them.

“The university welcomes fair and honest communication with employees regarding the costs and benefits of union representation and a fair and honest election process, if sufficient employee interest is demonstrated,” chief human resources officer Beth Behner wrote in a letter to the state agency. “Employees should be allowed to make this important decision without an improper inducement by ASEA.”

Both the ASEA and APEA have been scrambling for six months or more to collect signatures, eyeing a spot on an upcoming unionization ballot. Workers,
who rejected the last unionization vote in 1998, will have the option of choosing to be represented by a labor union or to remain unorganized.

Most employees at UA’s various campuses are already unionized, including professors and maintenance workers. Roughly 2,700 non-union employees remain, and most of them are being targeted by recruiters.

Both APEA President Bruce Senko and ASEA’s Duncan said their organizations have enough signatures to be eligible for a spot on the ballot.

“If they have an election, we’ll be in it,” Senko said.

Duncan said he thinks the most likely outcome of the mediation is that both ASEA and APEA will be allowed to appear on the ballot. The unions are continuing to collect employee signatures while the dispute is being heard.

ASEA officials had initially hoped that an election could take place before the spring semester ends in May, but that now appears unlikely, Duncan said.

The Alaska Labor Relations Agency will set the date for the election once it has verified the union-authorization cards it receives.

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