Arbitrator settles dispute between unions courting University of Alaska employees

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FAIRBANKS — An arbitrator has given the Alaska State Employees Association exclusive rights to proceed with unionization efforts at the University of Alaska’s campuses.

The ASEA and a rival union, the Alaska Public Employees Association, have been in an intensifying battle for the past year to sign up the university’s classified staff, which remains the last large unorganized group of university employees.

In March, the two labor organizations agreed to let a mediator resolve their turf war, deciding whether one or both would proceed.

An arbitrator from the AFL-CIO, a national federation of labor organizations, ruled in favor of the ASEA on Wednesday. ASEA Business Manager Jim Duncan said it gives the union exclusive organizing rights at UA until May 2011.

“There’ll be just one union, which was our goal from the beginning,” Duncan said.

Alaska AFL-CIO Executive President Vince Beltrami, who was not involved in the ruling, confirmed that ASEA was selected by the arbitrator. APEA President Bruce Senkow couldn’t be reached on Wednesday to comment on the decision.

The ruling was unexpected. After the AFL-CIO hearing on March 25, Duncan and Senkow said the most likely outcome was that both unions would be able to continue organizing and that both would probably be included among the options on an eventual unionization ballot.

“It’s a very pleasant surprise,” Duncan said. “It’s better than we hoped for and actually better than what I expected.”

A copy of the arbitrator’s ruling couldn’t be obtained by the News-Miner on Wednesday, but Duncan said it took into account the successful campaign ASEA had launched thus far among UA employees.

ASEA officials say they’ve collected enough union-authorization cards from the required 30 percent of eligible employees needed to trigger an election. The Alaska Labor Relations Agency had halted the process to verify those signatures until the arbitration process was complete.

Duncan said the specific makeup of the group being organized still hasn’t been determined but that it could include as many as 2,000 workers. The unorganized classified employees at UA include mainly office workers and support staff.
Other employee groups at UA’s campuses, including professors and maintenance workers, are already unionized and represented by the APEA.

The last unionization drive for classified staff occurred in 1998, but employees voted to remain unorganized.

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