Union targets fall vote at University of Alaska

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FAIRBANKS — Union officials believe they are near the end of a grueling organizing process at the University of Alaska, and they plan to push for a fall election to determine whether thousands of UA employees join the Alaska State Employees Association.

The ASEA submitted more than 1,000 union authorization cards to the Alaska Labor Relations Agency last month as part of its effort to represent UA’s classified staff, according to ASEA business manager Jim Duncan. Classified employees, who make up the last major group of UA workers who aren’t unionized, mostly include office workers at campuses throughout the state.

UA submitted a roster of 2,643 employees who it believes would included in the unionization effort, although ASEA officials will be able to challenge that list if it disagrees, said UA spokeswoman Kate Ripley. The proposed bargaining unit excludes classified employees who are in managerial and supervisory positions.

Duncan said ASEA submitted 1,022 union authorization cards to the state labor agency, which are being verified by state labor officials.

At least 30 percent of eligible workers must sign union authorization cards to trigger an election, and submissions are disqualified if they include incorrect information, are duplicates or if the employees are no longer employed at UA.

Jean Ward, a hearing officer for the state labor agency, said she’s still in the process of checking whether the number of verified cards reaches the 30 percent threshold. If it does, a 15-day period will begin when UA is allowed to formally object to the composition of the bargaining unit or make other complaints.

Duncan said ASEA will recommend an election in September or October, although the state will set the date for the vote. He said the union wants to avoid a summer vote, when many employees are on vacation.

“We just want everyone to be able to participate,” Duncan said.

The last effort to unionize classified workers happened in 1998, but employees voted to remain unorganized.

The unionization drive has been a bumpy process. It began with a nearly year-long battle between the ASEA and a rival organization, the Alaska Public Employees Association, about who had the right to represent UA employees. The AFL-CIO, which is the umbrella organization for both unions, ruled in April that the ASEA had exclusive rights to pursue UA classified employees.

ASEA had petitioned for an election in February, but withdrew that petition after UA and the APEA complained about its tactics. Some of the employees who had signed ASEA cards were entered in a drawing for Alaska Airlines miles, an
approach that was criticized as an improper inducement.

Most recently, Duncan has questioned whether UA officials may be working to subtly influence employees. He submitted a letter to the UA Board of Regents on June 2, asking the university pass a resolution pledging a neutral approach toward unionization. Duncan said some recent communications toward UA employees seemed hostile toward unionization.

UA has pushed back against some claims that union representation will mean better salaries and benefits, saying that both union and non-union employees have received similar increases in recent years.

“We were concerned that there were several actions ... that didn’t follow that line, that they weren’t remaining neutral,” Duncan said.

UA President Pat Gamble said in a letter of response that neutrality doesn’t necessarily mean silence, and that UA “has a duty to correct misinformation if it occurs and to ensure that our employees have accurate information regarding their employment.”

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