Union asks to cancel upcoming UA employee vote

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FAIRBANKS — A labor organization that wants to represent about 2,500 University of Alaska employees asked on Monday to cancel a scheduled union-authorization vote, saying it needs more time to battle opposition from the UA administration.

Ballots for workers to decide whether to join the Alaska State Employees Association are scheduled to be mailed out on Oct. 19. The system-wide group of employees, mainly office workers, is the last large non-union group at UA.

ASEA had pushed for a fall election, but business manager Jim Duncan said union officials needed to more thoroughly discuss the proposal with employees. A spokeswoman for the Alaska Labor Relations Agency said the election will be canceled at ASEA’s request.

Duncan said the UA response to unionization shifted when President Pat Gamble came aboard in June. He said a position of neutrality under former President Mark Hamilton has shifted to a “very active negative campaign” in recent months.

“With the new president they’ve been very active in putting out negative statements,” Duncan said. “We just don’t have time to counter them.”

UA spokeswoman Kate Ripley said the administration has consistently had a goal of getting factual information to employees and encouraging them to vote. She said the process has been “open and cordial” and there has been no position changes on unionization since Gamble came aboard.

“We’ve tried to disseminate accurate information to employees in the unit,” Ripley said in an e-mail. “We’ve urged them to ask questions, engage in the process, gather the facts and then vote.”

Duncan on Monday sent e-mails to UA employees who would be part of the proposed bargaining unit. He said in the e-mail that the staff needed “full and complete information” before making a vote.

UA has a website where it addresses questions on a variety of labor issues leading up to the election. Ripley said it serves as a clearinghouse for providing answers to questions that have emerged during the year-long unionization drive.

Duncan, however, said website postings have included information that is too speculative about wages, health insurance plans and union dues.

“Clearly I don’t think it’s appropriate for the university to say what we’d do as a union, but they’ve attempted to do that,” Duncan said.

Duncan estimated that about 45 percent of the potentially affected workers still
haven’t met with a union representative and that ASEA will be working to contact those employees in the months ahead. He said the union will ask that the election be rescheduled once union leaders believe they have met with enough employees.

“We’re not quitting, we’re not withdrawing entirely,” Duncan said. “We’re saying this is coming too quickly.”

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On the web:

www.alaska.edu/labor/union-organizing