

# AFSCME files for union election at PDC

Non-supervisory employees at the Portland Development Commission took a step closer to forming a union Feb. 23 when representatives from Oregon Council 75 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees filed for an election with the Oregon Employment Relations Board.

For the past two months organizers have quietly been meeting with PDC employees. The agency is the quasi-public development arm for the City of Portland. Its executive director is Bruce Warner, a former Oregon Department of Transportation bureaucrat who was appointed to the post a year-and-a-half ago by Mayor Tom Potter.

"A group of employees from PDC came to us in December, and it's just snow-balled from there," said Organizing Director Sue Lee-Allen.

Lee-Allen told the Northwest Labor Press that a majority of the 132 non-supervisory employees have signed union authorization cards.

"This is a highly-educated, highly-skilled level of folks who like everyone else want to be treated with fairness and respect at work," Lee-Allen said.

All PDC employees are considered "at will" employees and can be fired without cause.

Lee-Allen said it is one of the most fearful groups of employees she's dealt with in more than a decade of organizing. "The level of fear here is pretty pervasive," she said. "They've worked at PDC for a long time, and they've just had enough with the way they've been treated by some managers."

An election won't take place for another eight to 12 weeks, which is worrisome, Lee Allen said, because union organizers know that leaves a lot of time for management to try to dissuade workers from joining.

State law prohibits employers from interfering with employees trying to organize a union. Warner has told reporters his agency will stay neutral.

However, Warner reportedly told staffers that he personally opposes the

union. "We'd prefer to deal with employees on a one-on-one basis," he said.

And, not three days after word got out about the union organizing campaign, the nonunion Oregonian newspaper — a staunch supporter of the PDC — weighed-in with a blistering editorial against unionization.

The editorial and Warner's comments prompted Portland City Commissioner Randy Leonard to write a letter to the PDC director asking that he post a notice to all employees acknowledging their right to organize and pledging that the administration will remain neutral during the campaign.

Leonard and colleague Erik Sten also drafted a resolution supporting PDC staffers' efforts to organize. The Portland City Council passed that resolution unanimously on Feb. 21.

"I am heartened that the Portland City Council has spoken unanimously in support of PDC employees' right to organize," said Leonard, a former president of Fire Fighters Local 43. "I hope that the PDC management will choose to embrace the organizing efforts of their workers rather than fear them."

Oregon AFSCME Executive Director Ken Allen penned a response to the Oregonian editorial, but was told it wouldn't be printed.

"In my 20-plus years here, I've

never seen the Oregonian editorialize against workers who are trying to join a union," Allen said at the Feb. 23 Executive Board meeting of the Oregon AFL-CIO. "I think this type of editorial against workers sends a new message in our community. The Oregonian needs to stay out of our business."

Allen said he plans to put together a coalition of labor leaders to meet with the newspaper's editorial board to discuss their position.

At the monthly PDC commissioners' meeting on Feb. 28, newly-appointed Commissioner John Mohlis asked that the administration and management remain neutral until an election is held. Mohlis, executive secretary-treasurer of the Columbia-Pacific Building and Construction Trades Council, said PDC staffers have contacted him and other commissioners asking for a commitment to neutrality.

A flier produced by a core group of union supporters lists several reasons why PDC staffers should vote for the union. The list included: no cost-of-living increase in over eight years; no legitimate grievance procedure; vindictive and retaliatory managers and supervisors; unjust discipline; lack of promotional consideration; humiliating, disrespectful and hostile supervision; wages that lag behind comparable city and open market positions; personnel policies that are ignored; excessive overtime without benefit of an

agency-wide time policy for exempt non-supervisory employees; minority employees feeling disrespected and undervalued; and more.

PDC's annual budget of more than \$200 million is funded by tax dollars. For years it operated under the radar, with little public scrutiny. Its former executive director and commission chair were under fire for allowing no-bid contracts to friends, inside deals with staffers and contractors, and lavish spending on meals and alcohol. Its free-spending drew the attention of the Portland City Club, which in 2005 released a scathing report questioning PDC's lack of public accountability.

After Potter was elected mayor, he vowed to make the agency "more transparent." He brought in Warner and appointed a new commission.

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