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Independent union goes after Oregon corrections officers, AFSCME members

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

The Association of Oregon Corrections Employees (AOCE), a stand-alone 750-member union, is mounting its biggest-ever "raid" on Oregon AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees). In union parlance, a raid is an attempt by one union to represent workers who are already represented by another. Like the federal law that covers private sector workers, Oregon's public employee labor law recognizes just one union as the "exclusive bargaining agent" for any given group of workers.

AOCE was formed in 1992 when AFSCME members at several state prisons voted to leave and form an independent union. Now AOCE proposes to triple in size by adding the 1,669 employees who are in AFSCME's corrections officer bargaining unit. In a petition filed April 3, AOCE asked the Oregon Employment Relations Board to hold an election to determine which union has the most support within that bargaining unit. The agency expects to schedule a vote in late May or early June.

One drawback to having two unions for the same kind of worker is that workers lose their seniority when they transfer to an Oregon Department of Corrections facility represented by the other union. AOCE represents all union-eligible workers at the Oregon State Penitentiary, Mill Creek Correctional Facility, South Fork Forest

Camp, and Oregon Corrections Enterprises, plus corrections officers at the Oregon State Correctional Institute.

AFSCME represents Oregon Department of Corrections employees at 10 other locations, including the 1,669 officers and about 1,300 employees in other job classifications.

AOCE isn't part of the AFL-CIO, so it's not bound by the labor federation's rules against raiding other affiliated unions; nor is AFSCME prevented from raiding AOCE. Two years ago, AFSCME campaigned for the AOCE unit to return to the fold, but withdrew before an election was held when it appeared it didn't have majority support.

AOCE President Bryan Goodman told the NW Labor Press that corrections employees have several complaints about AFSCME, including a "liberal political agenda" and too much support for Democrats. Goodman said AOCE supporters don't like being a small part of a much bigger union, and want to be separate from other public employees. And they don't want their dues to go to AFSCME's national headquarters or to pay to organize nonunion workers. They want their dues to be spent only on issues that affect corrections employees.

"It's like they don't care about county or city workers, steelworkers or anybody else," counters Oregon AFSCME spokesperson Don Loving. "They have no sense of being part of a larger labor movement."

And Loving and other AFSCME leaders say there's value in being in a bigger union.

Though its dues are nearly identical to AFSCME's, AOCE has no paid staff. It pays contract lobbyist Bryan Delashmuth to represent its interests in Salem, and hires the Garretson Goldberg Fenrich Makler law firm to handle grievances and arbitrations. AFSCME by contrast, has 21,000 members, nearly 50 staff, and offices in all corners of the state. With four full-time lobbyists, it's one of the largest lobby forces in state politics.

That's important, Loving says, because AFSCME is a public workers union and the executive and legislative branches of government have a say on everything that affects public workers, from pay and benefits to work rules and age of retirement.

Loving says AFSCME is taking AOCE's challenge seriously and is waging a counter-campaign.

Until AOCE's challenge to AFSCME is resolved, contract bargaining for both AOCE and AFSCME will be on hold.

The Department of Corrections agreements with both unions expire June 30.

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