

...Group questions signature-gathering methods

(From Page 1)

and Sizemore \$250 each.

Fines of \$250 are a slap on the wrist, said Our Oregon Executive Director Kevin Looper, and are little deterrent.

"I'm immensely frustrated that we're facing as many ballot measures as we are, with really very little evidence that signatures have been collected within the intent of the law," Looper said.

Staff at Our Oregon say the secretary of state's 15-person Elections Division follows statutes, rules, and procedures to the letter, but seems to work on the

presumption that signatures are valid.

Here's how the process works. This year, 92,769 valid signatures are required to qualify a statutory measure, and 110,358 for a constitutional measure. When the initiatives' chief petitioners think they have enough signatures to get on the ballot, they deliver boxes containing signed petition sheets to the Secretary of State's office in Salem. Elections Division staff move quickly through the petition sheets, counting the signatures and looking to see if basic rules have been complied with, like whether someone signed the sheet

swearing they witnessed all the signatures. Then staff randomly select 1,000 signatures, and send copies of the sheets to the 36 county elections offices. For each signature, county elections clerks see if there's a voter registration card on file, and compare the signature to the one on the card. Signatures that don't match don't count toward qualifying the measure. If the measure fails to qualify based on that sample, a second random sample is generated in which 5 percent of the total signatures are checked.

But what if signatures in the samples match the ones on file because they were forged? Maybe a registered voter signed one petition, and then paid signature gatherers copied the signature onto other petition sheets.

Workers in Sizemore's organizations did just that on several 2000 ballot measures, as revealed by a civil lawsuit filed by the Oregon Education Association and American Federation of Teachers-Oregon. A forensic signature analyst demonstrated that Sizemore employees forged signatures, and the jury found Sizemore's groups guilty of engaging in a pattern of criminal activity.

In 2002, the union-supported watchdog group Voter Education Project mailed copies of turned-in petitions to over 15,000 individuals whose signatures were selected for the random samples, asking them if they had signed the enclosed petitions — 198 wrote back saying they had not. The project's efforts led to the convictions of several signature gatherers.

Our Oregon, the political successor to the Voter Education Project, keeps tabs on signature gathering efforts, and tries to observe election workers when they validate petitions. This year Our Oregon staff say they're seeing some disturbing things. Whole sheets of signatures have all the address information filled out in the same handwriting. In some cases the filled-out information doesn't appear to be same handwriting as the person who swears on the bottom of the sheet they are the circulator. On quite a few petition sheets, voter information appears to have been written using sheets of carbon paper. On one occasion, an Our Oregon observer pointed out sheets on which the signatures of one prolific circulator were obvious forgeries. These particular sheets were pulled by elections workers, but there was no investigation.

Mindful of the level of initiative fraud and abuse exposed in the past, union leaders have met with Secretary of State Bill Bradbury several times in the last year to plead for more vigorous enforcement.

"When the process is abused like it has been in the past, especially with Bill Sizemore, the voters of Oregon begin to question the process — and the job some of our state elected officials are doing," said Oregon Education Association President Larry Wolf, who met with Bradbury.

"I would like to do more," Bradbury told the NW Labor Press. "I'm not going to say we've done everything we could do."

Bradbury said the Legislature hasn't given his office the resources to police the initiative process. His office asked the Legislature to fund an investigator in 2003 and 2005, but not in 2007, when Democrats controlled both chambers.

As of now, no part of the initiative certification process is designed to detect signature forgery. There are no plans to look for fraud or forgery in the current batch of 1.2 million initiative signatures that are in boxes in the office basement. No government agency contacts voters to see if they signed petitions. The secretary of state has one staff person assigned to investigate initiative abuse, and he's not looking for forgery. He's doing criminal background checks on paid circulators and asking paid petitioners to show a badge they're required to carry.

That requirement is one of several reforms contained in the Initiative Reform and Modernization Act, a law the Legislature passed last year to help crack down on lawlessness in the initiative industry.

The new law gives the secretary of state the right to demand payroll records to prove initiative campaigns aren't paying by the signature. Bradbury was authorized to request payroll records when the law took effect in July, but didn't ask for the records until Jan. 2.

"The goal was to give them enough time to have records to turn in," said Scott Moore, spokesperson for the secretary of state.

A number of initiative campaigns failed to produce the requested records, so on Jan. 22 and 23, the Secretary of State's office applied the one sanction it has under the law: It prohibited the campaigns from gathering more signatures until they comply. The prohibition may be meaningless for some initiative campaigns, because they've already turned in enough signatures to qualify. For several others, failure to comply may keep them off the ballot.

Come this fall, a lot of union resources will ride on which ones make it to the ballot and which ones don't.

The Secretary of State's office has until Aug. 2 to certify measures for this



BILL SIZEMORE

Steelworkers' deal at plant may unravel

McMINNVILLE — Members of the bargaining team for United Steelworkers Local 8378 thought they had a deal April 30 with Schnitzer Steel Industries, owner of Cascade Steel Rolling Mills. But as this issue went to press, it appeared to have unraveled.

The previous contract, which had been extended day by day, expired April 28. Cascade announced it would stop collecting union dues as of May 4 and start advertising for replacement workers — a move the union interpreted as a provocation. But then the two sides reached a tentative agreement after an all-night session with a federal mediator.

In the tentative agreement, management backed off from its demand for a wage freeze, and union bargainers agreed to accept annual increases of 3.5 percent over the four-year contract as part of a package deal in which both sides made concessions on other issues.

Local 8378 President Joe Munger said the 3.5 percent wage offer was the best the union had seen in 30-some years, but added that some members weren't happy with it. Cascade Steel Rolling Mills is highly profitable right now, and the stock of its parent company, Schnitzer Steel Industries, is up to \$95 a share, double what it was a year ago.

Besides the annual wage hike, the deal increased starting pay, sick pay, and life insurance; committed the company to use all existing employees before contracting out for maintenance, and promised to bring contractors in-house if they continue for an extended time; improved safety training and the functioning of the joint labor management safety committee; extended the company's production bonus to workers on light-duty or who work less than full time because of military obligations; and gave the option of automatic payroll deduction to members who want to contribute to the union's political action fund.

The union didn't get the increase in the boot allowance it had sought, and gave up its proposal that the contract continue if the mill is sold.

The union announced April 30 it would recommend the deal to the local's 400-plus members and set a ratification vote for May 9. But shortly before the vote, management said it hadn't agreed on one item the union thought it had agreed to. The vote was canceled, and the two sides scheduled a meeting May 12 to see if they could resolve the disagreement. At the meeting, management stuck to its version of the offer. A new date of May 15 was set for members to vote on management's last offer; this time, the union would be recommending a "no" vote. The results of the vote weren't known as of press time.



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