

KNOCK, KNOCK, WHO'S THERE?

Freedom Foundation starts
opt-out campaign in Oregon

It's only been a few weeks since the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5-4 in *Janus v. AFSCME* that it's unconstitutional to require non-members to pay union dues, but the conservative Freedom Foundation has mobilized its campaign on the West Coast to notify every government employee of their right to opt-out from paying dues to unions.

Aaron Withe, director of the Oregon region for the Freedom Foundation, says the organization, a nonprofit based in Olympia, Wash., knew what the outcome of the *Janus* ruling would be. So for the past year they had been aggressively collecting contact information of government employees who are represented by public unions.

The organization obtained names and contact information thanks to their policy staff, who are experts in public records law, Withe adds.

Withe says they had to get the district attorney involved for some cities — notably Portland — to give employees' contact information to the nonprofit. However, Eugene distributed the names easily, he adds.

"Public workers should be concerned that this organization has their personal information," says Peter Starzynski, executive director of Northwest Accountability Project (NWAP), a nonprofit that monitors groups like Freedom Foundation. "They have no requirement to keep it secure."

Melissa Unger, executive director at Service Employees International Union (SEIU) 503, one of the unions Freedom Foundation has targeted for their Oregon campaign, is concerned about the organization's possession of the records and what that could mean.

Anyone can access public employees' contact information, and that such information could be used for commercial reasons, Unger says.

"The state system allows anyone to email 50,000 state workers during their workday," she says. "I don't think any employer would think that that was a good system."

However, going door-to-door to the houses of public employees will be the "bread and butter" of the campaign, Withe says. The organization will also spend money in their campaign to send out mailers, conduct social media campaigning and put up billboard advertising.

The canvassers will be paid slightly above minimum wage, Withe adds.

Withe tweeted on July 6 that 1,500 people represented



UNION SUPPORTER WITH CANVASSER IN SALEM

PHOTO COURTESY JILL BAKKEN/SEIU 503

by unions in Oregon have opted out since the *Janus* ruling with the assistance of Freedom Foundation.

That number doesn't add up, according to Starzynski and Unger. Starzynski says that might be the number of fair share dues-paying members who were automatically opted-out. Unger thinks it could be how much traffic the organization has received on their website.

Freedom Foundation also reported that their campaign has resulted in confrontations between SEIU and Freedom Foundation canvassers. The conservative nonprofit reports on their website that a "gaggle of purple-clad counter-protesters awaited" their arrival at 7 am. It goes on to say the "hacks only drew more workers to our station, allowing us to reach more people with important fact-based information."

"I don't know what they would've expected when they walk into a worksite with tons of SEIU leaders and then tell them to drop their union," Unger says.

She wouldn't call it a protest. Members of the SEIU were just holding signs that showed their solidarity with the union, she says.

"They use fake numbers. They just kind of give out misinformation," Unger says. "Their whole strategy is to get in the media to raise more money."

Starzynski says he was at the organization's canvass in

Salem, and the canvassers were just standing there. The point of their canvassing is to show potential funders that they're making an impact, he says.

Murdock Charitable Trust, a nonprofit based in Washington state, has contributed more than \$1 million to Freedom Foundation, according to the nonprofit's tax forms. Murdock Charitable Trust also funds Portland Fellowship's gay conversion therapy centers in Portland, according to NWAP.

The end goal for Withe, he says, is that with the *Janus* ruling, unions should be like the internet company Netflix: The union should benefit the member in order to request membership dues, and employees should be able to negotiate their own contracts as well.

He adds that unions spend a "massive amount of money" on political campaigns, and that a lot of the members don't agree with the politics.

NWAP acquired a video from 2014 of Tom McCabe, the nonprofit's CEO, saying their goal is to limit the influence of unions and allow the conservative voice to be heard.

"To this point it's been an epic failure," Starzynski says. "Because they have deep pockets and people's personal information, people are taking it seriously because there's a level of threat." ■

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