

Labor dispute heating up in Edison - Long-running issue involves one of the state's largest developers

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At the national level, the Service Employees International Union and the United Food and Commercial Workers are allies.

The SEIU and the UFCW are part of the Change-to-Win coalition that broke from the AFL-CIO this summer.

But in Edison, locals of the two unions are on opposite sides of a battle involving one of the state's largest developers and managers of office buildings.

The controversy stems from a long-simmering dispute between SEIU Local 32BJ and the M. Alfieri Co. in Edison.

Eschewing picket lines, the union has hired expert consultants to appear before municipal planning and zoning boards in the past few years to oppose Alfieri's development proposals.

The company claims the union, which represents janitors, is trying to coerce it into using contractors whose employees are members of Local 32BJ.

"The tactic this union is using is like blackmail, they oppose our projects unless we use them as the union," said Dominick Alfieri, whose family has owned the company for 51 years.

Now Alfieri is fighting back.

An Alfieri cleaning contractor filed unfair labor charges last month against Local 32BJ, accusing it of violating national labor laws by threatening members of another union.

In turn, Local 32BJ filed unfair labor practice charges last week against the cleaning contractor - Edison-based Raritan Building Services Corp. - accusing it of violating labor laws by illegally assisting another union in organizing its employees.

The other union is UFCW Local 348S.

Local 32BJ members say UFCW Local 348S is a "company union" that negotiates "sweetheart contracts" that favor Alfieri rather than the workers.

"This is a local we've had disputes with before that has substandard contracts," said Rob Hill, Local 32BJ's director of organizing in New Jersey. "We're alleging in this case that the employer brought this union in and assisted them illegally in organizing the workers to keep them from organizing with our union."

Officials with Queens-based UFCW Local 348S could not be reached for comment.

Both the SEIU and UFCW national organizations joined with the Teamsters in bolting from the AFL-CIO this summer, saying the traditional labor coalition spent too much time and money on political lobbying and not enough on organizing workers.

The charges filed with the National Labor Relations Board by Raritan Building Services accuse Local 32BJ of pressuring third parties to stop doing business with the company, said Roseland-based lawyer Glen Smith, who works for Alfieri and Raritan.

Smith said Local 32BJ also tried to force Raritan to deal exclusively with it after the company picked UFCW Local 348S and threatened employees there that they would lose their jobs unless Raritan agreed to deal with Local 32BJ.

Smith said Local 32BJ filed charges in an attempt to delay any NLRB proceedings against them.

Local 32BJ filed its unfair labor complaints Wednesday, accusing Raritan of unlawfully assisting the UFCW Local 348S in an attempt to deter employees from joining Local 32BJ.

It claims the company distributed Local 348S membership applications to the employees, threatened to fire employees if they didn't sign, fired employees that didn't sign and unlawfully recognized Local 348S.

The claims before the NLRB are part of a two-year battle between Local 32BJ and Alfieri that has been fought in some unusual venues for a labor dispute.

Rather than manning the traditional picket line, Local 32BJ members began hiring consultants, forming coalitions with groups and individuals, manning phone banks and mailing fliers telling residents the company's projects would have adverse impacts on the environment, traffic or other areas of their lives.

Local 32BJ is fighting projects in Florham Park and in Old Bridge, where it has helped organize a coalition of conservation groups called Smart Growth Old Bridge. It unsuccessfully fought an Alfieri project in Edison in October 2004.

Union officials say their efforts are on behalf of members who live in the towns but concede they are targeting Alfieri because of what they call the company's anti-union practices.

"Companies who don't play fair with workers don't play fair with the community or the environment," Hill said. "Alfieri is out of step with responsible companies in New Jersey."

In Old Bridge, the union is fighting Alfieri's proposed Esplanade at Metropark South development. The Sierra Club, a member of the Smart Growth Old Bridge coalition, has asked the state Department of Environmental Protection and the Old Bridge zoning board to reject Alfieri's application for the Esplanade development.

"Any accusation by Alfieri is just a thinly veiled attempt to divert attention from the serious problems that plague this controversial development," Hill said. "We've made no secret that the union is working with the Sierra Club and other environmental and community groups to address concerns about the development of Metropark South."

But Smith said the union is more concerned with labor than the impact of the development.

"Part and parcel of their overall plan is designed solely to coerce Alfieri into utilizing only contractors that have labor contracts with Local 32BJ," Smith said.

He said Alfieri has contractors who have labor agreements with other unions, including the UFCW Local 348S, which he said has the largest number of private employee members in the state.

Alfieri said about 90 percent of the company's buildings use union labor, including a couple that have contracts with Local 32BJ.

Smith said Local 32BJ violated the National Labor Relations Act by trying to coerce Alfieri into using it instead of the other union.

"With regard to employees who have chosen other unions, Local 32BJ's actions are scandalous," Smith said. "They go out and tell these employees that if they don't change their mind, if they don't switch over to Local 32BJ, the local is going to make sure it forces the contractor out of the location and the people will lose their jobs."

Local 32BJ represents 70,000 doormen, porters, window cleaners and building superintendents in the New York metropolitan area, with 6,000 of those members employed in New Jersey and 9,000 living here.

Alfieri, whose company owns properties in Middlesex, Morris, Monmouth, Bergen and Union counties, said the local only began using the current strategy after it lost several elections to other unions.

"The employees voted for other unions and Local 32BJ got angry, but they can't force people to join their union," Alfieri said.