

Workers at Oregon Department of Transportation may break away from SEIU

23 May 2005

Associated Press Newswires

SALEM, Ore. - A group of workers at the Oregon Department of Transportation are threatening to sever ties with the local chapter of the Service Employees International Union, which represents more than 17,000 state employees.

Disgruntled transportation workers claim the union is more focused on politics than on advancing issues of wages and benefits, according to a report in the Statesman-Journal of Salem.

If the workers succeed at scheduling and winning an election, nearly 1,900 transportation workers would form their own union. Most work in Highway Division offices and shops across the state.

"If you talk to some of our people at the shops, some of them have not seen a union organizer in five years or longer," said Craig Chadwick, a spokesman for the angry transportation workers. "The only time they see an organizer is when SEIU wants something."

Chadwick said workers also disagree with the union's bent.

"SEIU Local 503 is so involved with political and social issues that it has not dealt with wages, benefits and working conditions," he said. "We feel that is dividing us as to what we need to do for ourselves as an organization. It's none of our business whether we are Democrats or Republicans."

SEIU Local 503 is a major supporter of Democrats, although it gives to some Republicans.

Its president, Joe DiNicola, said he takes the challenge seriously. But he said the thousands of state workers who showed up for a rally Saturday on the Capitol Mall demonstrate a need for solidarity.

He said the union stands not only for better wages and benefits for its workers, but also for legislation dealing with health care and other issues of concern to all workers.

Under Oregon's collective bargaining law for public employees, workers who want new union representation must collect signatures from 30 percent of those in the proposed bargaining unit.

Those signature cards and a petition must be filed with the state Employment Relations Board.

The filing deadline is by the end of the current contract with SEIU, which is June 30.