

S.C. Gov. Faces Lawsuit For Anti-Union Comments

Jim Davenport, Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley is facing her first big lawsuit after saying the state would try to keep unions out of the Boeing Inc. plant in North Charleston.

The lawsuit filed Thursday in U.S. District Court in Charleston by the International Association of Machinists and AFL-CIO asked for a court order telling Haley and her director of the Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation to butt out and remain neutral in matters concerning union activities.

"There's no secret I don't like the unions," Haley said when asked about the litigation. "We are a right-to-work state. I will do everything I can to defend the fact we are a right-to-work state. We are pro-business by nature. I want us to continue to be pro-business. If they don't like what I said, I'm sorry, that's how I feel."

The lawsuit came after remarks Haley made last month as she nominated Catherine Templeton to run the state's labor agency. She said Templeton's union-fighting background would be helpful in state fights against the labor groups, particularly at Boeing.

"She is ready for the challenge," Haley said at the time. "We're going to fight the unions and I needed a partner to help me do it. She's the right person to help me do it."

For her part, Templeton said: "In my experience I have found there is not one company that operates more efficiently when you put another layer of bureaucracy in. ... We will do everything we can to work with Boeing and make sure that their work force is taken care of, that they run efficiently and that we don't add anything unnecessarily."

The lawsuit said their actions, "taken under the color of state law, intimidate and coerce workers so that they are compelled to refrain from joining or supporting labor organizations."

Machinists union spokesman Frank Larkin told The Associated Press the lawsuit is an attempt to make sure workers' constitutionally protected rights aren't harmed by South Carolina's governor. Larkin hadn't seen another governor be so plainspoken.

"This is practically unprecedented for a state to be so clear and so overt," Larkin said.

If "the machinists are offended that the Governor doesn't think unions are a good thing in South Carolina, they're just going to have to get used to it," Haley spokesman Rob Godfrey said.

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Meanwhile, the National Labor Relations Board has threatened a federal lawsuit against South Carolina, Arizona, South Dakota and Utah over constitutional amendments guaranteeing secret-ballot union elections. Unions want to also be able to organize workers through signature drives.

South Carolina legislators are adopting a bring-it-on posture on the threat. Senate Republican Leader Harvey of Gaffney said Wednesday the federal government should be worrying about more important things like protecting the nation's borders and he will side with the 86 percent of South Carolinians who voted in favor of changing the constitution.

Templeton was confirmed by the state Senate for the job last week. But during her confirmation hearing, state Sen. Robert Ford asked her if she had orders to crack down on labor unions. The Democrat represents the Charleston district where the Boeing plant is being built.

"But you don't have no mandate from nobody that we're not going to let no labor union exist at Boeing?" Ford asked.

"No, sir. Of course not. We don't have the authority to do that," Templeton said.

Ford said Thursday he took that as assurance that Haley was just playing to manufacturing and business groups and not overstepping her authority.

South Carolina's anti-union reputation was key to the 2009 decision by Chicago-based Boeing to expand its assembly operation here. In 2009, only two other states had smaller shares of unionized workers than South Carolina's 5.4 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Before Boeing's board decided to expand the North Charleston operation, it used the threat of the plant in bargaining with the machinists union. The union waged an eight-week strike in 2008 that shut down the company's Puget Sound assembly line in Washington.

Associated Press Writer Seanna Adcox contributed to this report.

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