Machinists Union Talks To Boeing Employees In S.C.

CHARLESTON, S.C. (AP) — Union officials are meeting with workers at Boeing's North Charleston plant.

The informal sessions with the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers have only attracted a few dozen employees, The Post and Courier of Charleston reported (http://bit.ly/ScaLvp).

But the meetings are especially sensitive after the fight between the union and Boeing after the company announced it was building an assembly plant in South Carolina. Union officials said the Charleston plant was built in retaliation for workers striking at the company's Washington plants. The National Labor Relations Board filed a lawsuit that was later settled.

More than 50 Boeing workers spoke to the International Association of Machinists about their concerns at the South Carolina plant, said Tommy Mayfield, union Grand Lodge representative for the Southern territory.

The concerns included overtime, scheduling and opportunities for promotion, said Mayfield, who added that the workers in South Carolina were aware the union employees in Washington were paid more.

Boeing issued a statement saying it was aware of the meetings.

"We're continuously working on making Boeing South Carolina a place where teammates have a voice and can speak for themselves without having to rely on a third party to speak for them," the company said.

The International Association of Machinists has had members in the Charleston area before. Dennis Murray, currently a quality inspector in the aft-body factory at the South Carolina Boeing plant, was working at Vought Aircraft Industries when the union won representation rights in November 2007. He was behind the drive that got rid of the union less than two years later. He also was on Boeing's side in the NLRB fight.

He can't believe the machinists union is trying to get back into Boeing after being told emphatically to leave.

"Bottom line, it's all about control. The union does not like the fact that Boeing union has a nonunion facility that makes airplanes because now they can't shut down the whole line," Murray said.

U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint was stunned to hear that a union was trying to organize

workers at the South Carolina plant.

"It would blow me away if the employees of Boeing here were so foolish as to unionize when that was one of the key reasons that this plant was built," said DeMint, R-S.C. "I'm surprised there's even one employee there is willing to sit down and talk."

Mayfield said the machinists union has the same goal Boeing has to help the company prosper.

"Never and forever would the machinists union ... want to come in here and negotiate Boeing out of Charleston," Mayfield said. "That's cutting off your nose to spite your face."

To get a vote on whether the union could come into the South Carolina plant, the machinists union would have to get the signatures of 30 percent of the proposed bargaining unit, said Dennis Nolan, a labor law professor at the University of South Carolina. That does not include contractors, managers and white-collar workers who could not be members.

It's way too early to tell whether the South Carolina Boeing plant will ever have union workers, Nolan said.

"What the union wants to do is maintain a presence and develop contacts and a few potential leaders and then if something happens ... and there's a lot of dissatisfaction, the union could be there to capitalize on it," Nolan said.

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