

Politics & Government

Mass. union reaches out to CT guards

By Ed Jacovino
Journal Inquirer

Published: Wednesday, July 20, 2011 2:06 PM EDT

The union that represents prison guards in Massachusetts and Maine is courting in Connecticut, asking them to drop their current union, the biggest in the state.

"We're receiving a very high reception," said Christopher Murphy, executive director of the Springfield-based National Correctional Employees Union. "The members overwhelmed. They're tired of AFSCME. They're feeling left out."

More than 4,500 prison guards and other prison staff make up the state's NP-4 branch. Right now, they're more than one-quarter of the larger American Federation of State and Municipal Employees Council 4. Council 4 represents about 15,600 state employees, the largest among state employee unions.

Murphy wants the state's prison guards to leave Council 4 for his group, which represents correction workers and considers itself the "fastest growing correction union in England."

Council 4 union leaders accuse Murphy's group of trying to poach their members and say they have represented prison guards well, and question whether Murphy can get enough support to clear the hurdle he needs from the state to make the switch.

So far, Murphy has been visiting the prisons and passing out petition cards. If 30 percent of the union's members say they want to switch, the change must be OK'd by the state board, and then it can go to a vote among rank-and-file union members.

For Murphy, the biggest complaint he's heard is that union members say they've been misled by union leaders at the negotiating table over concessions. Prison units overwhelmed by the concession deal.

"AFSCME's going through this process with them, not giving them adequate information," said. "They're frustrated."

Murphy also pointed to the decision by the coalition of state employee unions to lower the threshold needed to approve a concession agreement. Critics have said it discounts the votes of those who opposed the deal.

"Until now there was a very fair process," Murphy said. "But that process has been broken."

Salvatore Luciano, executive director of Council 4, voted against the move, saying "in respect to the majority of AFSCME members" who voted to reject the labor deal.

Luciano didn't return a call for comment Tuesday. Peter Thor, Council 4's director of planning, was critical of Murphy's union. "They literally smell around and look for negotiations," he said.

And Jon T. Pepe, president of AFSCME Local 391, which represents prison guards in Suffield, and Enfield, echoed the sentiments. "They're a business, not a union," he said, calling the group a "fly-by-night union."

"What good would a Massachusetts union do for Connecticut state employees?" A similar move by Murphy's group was rejected by union members two years ago, he said.

Pepe also stood up for AFSCME Council 4, saying the union had represented its members well. "AFSCME is the union that has gotten us every single benefit we have gotten today," he said.

officers," Pepe said. "By breaking correction officers out of AFSCME, all they would do is take away our politic

He also questioned whether his members have the legal authority to switch anyway. State labor relations rule happen in the August before a contract expires. For the prison guards, that was last year.

Murphy says his move is OK because the prison guards are operating without a contract now — it expired at t

That question would be reviewed by the Labor Relations Board if Murphy is able to turn over enough cards to forward, Nancy Steffens, a spokeswoman for the state Labor Department, said.

For Murphy, meanwhile, the move is one that his group has made before in other states. It added prison guar Washington, and Franklin counties in Maine to its ranks since February — pulling them from other unions, incl Teamsters.

His pitch: "Their best interests are not being represented by AFSCME at this moment in time."

Copyright © 2011 - Journal Inquirer