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Immigration workers plan union votes

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January 23, 2008

ST. ALBANS -- Three of four dates have been set for hundreds of immigration employees to vote on whether or not to form a union at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services facility in St. Albans.

Less than a month after Stanley Inc. began serving as the contractor for the St. Albans center in early December, about 360 of 400 immigration workers filed to join the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, said Kimberly Lawson, the union's international representative. Stanley hired three subcontractors to help operate the facility.

Wage cuts are one of the primary reasons workers are unionizing.

Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., spoke with immigration employees who packed into a small union office in St. Albans this week.

"All over this country, there is a squeeze on working people," Sanders said Monday, speaking to a standing-room-only crowd of about 40 employees.

With gasoline and heating costs rising dramatically, workers must join forces to be treated fairly, he said.

"I will speak for you in Washington. But -- equally or more important -- you have got to speak for yourself through a union," Sanders said.

When it began its contract, Arlington, Va.-based Stanley Inc. reclassified about 100 of its 400 St. Albans employees from "general clerk" to "data entry" -- pushing those employees' base pay down 11.7 percent to \$26,707.

Stanley introduced an incentive plan that would give some employees an opportunity to recover lost pay, but workers remain discontented.

If the union drive succeeds, it will be the first portion of Stanley's more than 3,500-employee work force that is represented by a union, Stanley's senior vice president Eric Wolking said Monday.

"We've never faced an effort like this before. We never had petitions filed at the National Labor Relations Board," he said. "There is no doubt we got off on the wrong foot."

Kathy Persons, 49, of Alburgh works for Choctaw Archiving Enterprise of Durant, Okla. -- one of Stanley's subcontractors. Previously, she was classified as "clerk II." She has been switched to "data entry clerk I," she said, and her salary fell from \$14.54 an hour to \$12.84 an hour.

"I planned to have a career with them ... but now I feel like I'm not worth anything," she said.

A union, Persons said, will give workers respect, better wages and benefit improvements.

"These guys get rich by knocking your wages down," Sanders said, rallying the crowd.

Wolking declined to comment on Sanders' remarks.

For the first half of fiscal year 2008, Stanley earned \$11.7 million, up 139 percent from the \$4.9 million earned in the

same period the prior year, according to the company's November financial statement.

Stanley Inc. won a three-year, \$225-million contract from the Department of Homeland Security to operate immigration facilities in Vermont and California. No petitions have been filed to form a union at the California facility, Wolking said.

Jeremy Murray, 30, of St. Albans City has worked for immigration services for more than six years and said his wages have fallen about \$270 a month under Stanley.

During the last unionization effort at the St. Albans facility, about five years ago, Murray voted against unionizing because, he said, he believed the company when it said conditions would improve.

This time, with a new employer, he is voting for the union.

Four union votes -- one for Stanley and one for each subcontractor -- will be held. Two votes are scheduled for Jan. 31 and one is slated for Feb. 1. The date for Stanley's employees has not been determined.

All employees who process immigration documents should be federal employees, Sanders said, not employees for private-sector contractors and subcontractors.

"I'm not a great fan of privatization. Never have been," he said.

Contact Dan McLean at 651-4877 or dmclean@bfp.burlingtonfree.com press.com Union vote dates Stanley Inc. has hired three subcontractors to help operate the St. Albans immigration office. A union vote will be held by employees of each entity. A vote date for Stanley employees has not yet been announced. The subcontractors are:

Choctaw Archiving Enterprise of Durant, Okla., owned and operated by Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma: Jan. 31.

Federal Working Group Inc. of Falls Church, Va.: Jan. 31.

Northrop Grumman Corp. of Los Angeles: Feb. 1.