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HEADLINE: Anti-union group targets Freightliner; NLRB filing alleges bias toward UAW

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BODY:

A Washington-based anti-union group has filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board alleging that Freightliner LLC is ignoring its employees' wishes to remain nonunion.

The National Right to Work Foundation alleges that Freightliner has ignored a petition signed this summer by nearly 70 percent of the employees at its Freightliner Custom Chassis Corp. plant in Gaffney, S.C., saying they do not want to be unionized by the UAW.

The complaint, filed Wednesday, Sept. 3, arises from what labor observers consider a key new organizing strategy by the UAW and other unions: seeking top-level management neutrality agreements that allow unions to organize through the more informal process of gathering employee signatures rather than conducting elections, which often are hostile.

Eye on Mercedes

In the past year, the strategy has helped unions organize plants of suppliers Dana Corp. and Johnson Controls Inc.

UAW officials have indicated that they hope also to use the strategy to get officials at DaimlerChrysler, which owns Freightliner, to endorse the unionization of its Mercedes-Benz U.S. International Inc. plant in Vance, Ala., where traditional organizing efforts have fizzled for four years.

But in recent months, the right-to-work organization has responded by stepping up its legal challenges, filing labor complaints and requests for injunctions against Dana, Johnson Controls, Freightliner and Heartland Industrial Partners LP, which controls suppliers Collins & Aikman and Metaldyne Inc.

The UAW has dismissed the work of the foundation, a nonprofit legal action group with an annual budget of about \$6 million provided mostly by individuals and foundations.

In a recent statement, UAW President Ron Gettelfinger discounted National Right to Work Foundation complaints, saying that labor law supports the process of organizing through a card check - in which union representation is established once 50 percent-plus-one of a work force signs cards approving the union.

No guarantees

Steve Babson, a labor professor at Wayne State University in Detroit, says the push for neutrality agreements is an organizing strategy that is growing both inside and outside the auto industry. The motivation for a company such as Freightliner to agree to neutrality is typically "the recognition that a big company needs to have consistent labor practices across all of its operations," Babson says.

But, he says, "I'm not sure what a neutrality clause gets you in the Deep South when you have a hostile attitude toward unions in general."

indications are that Freightliner has reached such an accord. The commercial truckmaker has pledged neutrality during UAW organizing operations at a Cleveland, N.C., truck plant and a Gastonia, N.C., parts plant.

National Right to Work Foundation lawyer Glenn Taubman alleges that Freightliner has held plant meetings to endorse union involvement and provided organizers with workers' home addresses and phone numbers.

But last month at Freightliner's Gaffney plant, two of its 540 employees filed a labor board complaint against the company and the UAW, alleging that Freightliner is unfairly pressuring workers to unionize by withholding a

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previously agreed-to wage increase until the UAW representation question is resolved.

Freightliner spokesman Chris Brandt says the company is unable to discuss specifics of the legal matter but says that Freightliner remains neutral on unionization.

The Freightliner plant is not the only work force to rebel. Earlier this summer, UAW organizing was rejected by workers at a Johnson Controls plant in Athens, Tenn., even after the company attempted to open the plant to the union.

At a Dana plant in Elizabethtown, Ky., the UAW was certified in August after Dana accepted a card count rather than following through with a scheduled plant election.

Some employees there have complained to the labor board, also with legal support from the National Right to Work Foundation.