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The Star-Ledger

AFL-CIO claims Continental is trying to clip union's wings

Wednesday, December 12, 2007

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The head of New Jersey's AFL-CIO chapter yesterday accused Continental Airlines of attempting to block efforts to unionize 7,650 service employees at Newark Liberty International Airport.

Charles Wowkanech, the union's state chapter president, said airline officials distributed "anti-union" literature to Continental employees amid attempts by the Transport Workers Union to organize the workers. Many of the employees are baggage handlers, he said.

"Let the people have their choice," Wowkanech said.

But Julie King, a Continental spokeswoman, said the carrier is doing just that.

"It's the employees' choice, not the company's," said King. "We have a solid relationship with all of our employees, non-union and union."

King said the Transport Workers Union has tried unsuccessfully six times to organize the workers in recent years. Continental is by far the largest airline operating out of Newark Liberty, one of the nation's busiest airports.

Wowkanech released two letters from top Continental officials touting efforts by the company to help its workers prosper, raising questions about the union's motives and saying they hope employees will "make the right decision" by deciding not to sign cards and join the union.

"Each of you will have to decide for yourselves whether you trust us and the path we've chosen and whether you want to continue following that path," said one letter, signed by Larry Kellner, Continental's chairman and CEO, and other top officials. "Frankly, we believe that it's time now -- once and for all -- to the let the unions know: "No means no."

In a press release accompanying information about a rally yesterday, union officials also said the employees took a 10 percent pay cut in recent years and now should be rewarded with increases as the industry returns to profitability.

But King said such sacrifices were commonplace in the airline industry in recent years, noting, "All our employees took cost reductions, up to and including our chairman and CEO."

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