

Union protest erupts in fistfight

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A union protest at Charleston's Eye & Ear Clinic has gone on for weeks, and last week it boiled over into violence.

Members of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Council of Carpenters are staging the informational picket at the Kanawha Boulevard facility, where the construction company Wolfe Services is working on a \$3 million two-story addition.

Their complaint: Wolfe is paying substandard wages.

On Wednesday a scuffle arose, and two union members, Joe Elliott and Randall May, suffered several bruises. A camera being used by May was destroyed, they said. Both had treatment and CT scans at CAMC General Hospital.

"We were peaceful and exercising our constitutional rights," Elliott said.

Pickets were back Friday morning in front of the clinic with a large inflated plastic skunk and signs reading: "Eye & Ear Hires Substandard Contractor" and "Eye & Ear Clinic Contractor Unfair to Workers."

No charges have been filed against anyone involved in Wednesday's fight, according to Lt. Eric Johnson of the Charleston Police Department, which is still investigating the incident.

Wolfe owner John Wolfe denies the charge that he treats his workers poorly.

"They say I pay substandard wages and no benefits," Wolfe said. "Some of my guys have been with me for up to 18 years. I pay them between \$21 and \$24 an hour and 100 percent of their health-care benefits. I give them vacation pay, holiday pay and clothing allowances."

The company provides year-round construction work that supports 20 families, Wolfe said. It specializes in smaller buildings and charges significantly less than major construction companies, he said.

The Carpenters want to organize Wolfe's workers.

"We had already been protesting for three weeks," Elliott said. "On Wednesday, we were filming a bunch of temporary employees moving equipment onto the job.

"They clearly did not want us to videotape. The superintendent was very nasty and belligerent. A guy named Larry, who drives a dump truck, sucker-punched Randall. Then three other guys jumped on me. It's hard to fight off five people."

No one at the Eye & Ear Clinic, which employs 46 people, returned calls last week.

On Wednesday, Wolfe said, his company had hired an out-of-state contractor to install pilings on the Eye & Ear construction site, a job his small company cannot do.

The fight began when those contractors began moving equipment onto the site.

Wolfe said two men working for him initiated the physical confrontation: his brother, Joe Wolfe, and Larry Cabell.

“Larry was beating up two of their guys when two of my other guys pulled them off,” Wolfe said.

Steve White, executive director of the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation labor umbrella group, blames the “greedy doctors” who operate the Eye & Ear Clinic. “They hire thugs,” says White, whose organization includes the Carpenters. “They should be ashamed of what they are doing.”

Wolfe, who also owns Trojan Landing and Marina and the Barge Restaurant Bar & Grill, said he is proud of his company and stressed that he has hired only local workers since the family-owned construction business began in 1976.

“I have nothing against unions,” he said. “I don’t bid against them. I don’t compete with them.”

Norm Ferland, a 40-year-old construction worker for Wolfe, said the two best jobs in his life have been serving four years with the Navy and working for Wolfe Construction.

“When I went to Iraq in 2005 and came back, Mr. Wolfe told me to take as much time as I wanted before going back to work,” Ferland said. “I was gone for a year and I still had my job.”

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