

SEIU employees picket own union over layoffs

Sam Hananel, Associated Press

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Sometimes even unions have union problems.

Dozens of employees of the Service Employees International Union picketed their own union Friday over its decision to lay off about 75 workers.

The staffers marched outside SEIU headquarters in Washington as they yelled into bullhorns, passed out flyers and chanted, "Justice for all, not just some."

"This union is supposed to be at the forefront of the progressive movement, but it can't seem to follow its own ideology," said Malcolm Harris, president of the Union of Union Representatives, which represents 210 SEIU organizers and field staff around the country.

The UUR has filed unfair labor practice charges and age and race discrimination claims against SEIU. Harris called SEIU leaders "hypocrites" for calling out corporations that shed workers, yet moving to lay off their own employees.

SEIU spokeswoman Michelle Ringuette called the complaints meritless and said layoffs are needed because the union is shifting organizing work away from its national office to local unions.

"We're in the middle of realignment," Ringuette said. "This is how we implement the democratic decisions arrived at our convention."

But Harris said the SEIU's treatment of employees could undermine the union's effort to pass federal legislation that would make it easier to organize unions. He said the politically powerful union was borrowing unsavory management tactics, such as dismissing workers without proper notice and refusing to meet with employees before their collective bargaining agreement expires next week.

Ringuette denied any wrongdoing. She called the protest "a sign of a thriving democratic movement" and says the union hopes to work out the dispute.

She also said SEIU is trying to help those laid off find other jobs and has identified 80 open positions at local unions that they could apply for.