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Drivers Want To Change Unions

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ABQRide is ground zero for another labor fight.

At least 120 of City Hall's transit drivers want to ditch their AFSCME union and realign themselves instead with the New Mexico Transportation Union, according to documents submitted to the city labor board.

The NMTU was the union that represented bus drivers until 2008, when AFSCME won an election to take over.

But there's a catch this time: The drivers who want a change say Mayor Richard Berry's administration won't order a vote on the issue.

Paul Livingston, an attorney for the New Mexico Transportation Union, filed a complaint with the labor board last week. He alleges the city has improperly refused to recognize NMTU as the bargaining unit for drivers or to let employees vote on the issue.

More than 120 drivers have signed membership cards with NMTU, Livingston's complaint says.

But the Berry administration isn't convinced.

Rob Perry, the city's chief administrative officer, said in a letter to NMTU that its petition "is defective in several critical respects." The transit workers are already covered by an AFSCME union, so that group must be decertified before NMTU is recognized.

Decertifying the union involves the gathering of more petition signatures.

"We don't have a preference for one union or another," Perry said in an interview. "We don't have a dog in this fight."

He said the city simply wants the union groups to follow the process outlined in city ordinance.

Livingston, however, maintains Perry's interpretation of the process is at odds with what's happened in the past.

Ernest Lucero, a bus driver and chairman of the NMTU effort, said AFSCME isn't much of a presence and drivers want a change.

"They're never there. They never show up," Lucero said of AFSCME.

But Steve Griego, president of the AFSCME union that covers bus drivers, blue-collar workers and others, said his group has made real improvements for drivers, including the start of an arbitration system to settle some disputes.

"It's actually gotten better for the drivers," Griego said. "The only problem is they're underpaid, and we're trying to resolve it."

The labor board has a meeting scheduled for mid-April