Center protests alleged wage theft

The Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa accused an Iowa company of wage theft, low wages, and a denial of pay stubs.

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The crowd occupying the Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa stood at the front of the building’s main room in silence, letting the signs they held speak for them. “We deserve better,” “fair pay today,” and “stop wage theft,” some of them read.

The center held a press conference at its office Wednesday afternoon to announce that it will file a request with the U.S. Department of Labor.

The complaint is over the alleged unfair treatment of workers at Iowa City’s RockTenn factory, as well as the two staffing agencies it uses, CFA Staffing and Sedona Staffing.

“We want RockTenn and its contractors to know that our community expects it to comply with the law and treat its workers with the respect and dignity they deserve,” said Misty Rebik, the executive director of the Center for Worker Justice.

RockTenn, CFA Staffing, and Sedona Staffing were not available for comment.

The Georgia-based RockTenn manufactures corrugated and consumer packaging, with a factory based in Iowa City.

Rebik said her organization believes these three companies may be in violation of the Fair Labor Standards Act.

The call for change came on the National Day of Action Against Wage Theft.

Rebik said the violation may stem from the companies’ practice of instructing workers to arrive 30 to 45 minutes early but not being paid for that time.

Former and current RockTenn employees shared testimonies of the alleged abuse they faced: denial of pay stubs, unstable work schedules, and wage theft.

Sen. Joe Bolkom, D-Iowa City, spoke at the event, calling wage theft Iowa’s No. 1 crime.

“Iowa’s wage-theft laws are so weak [that] dishonest employers get away with stealing from our families, friends, and neighbors,” he said.

Bolkom said one of the largest groups preventing change to wage-theft laws is the Iowa Association of Business and Industry.

“IA BI is blocking the commonsense reforms that would make sure Iowans are paid the wages they are owed,” Bolkom said.

He offered reforms that would help workers and keep businesses accountable, including written terms of employment, larger penalties for wage theft, protecting workers from retaliation, and hiring more investigators to assist private-sector employees.

Rep. Art Staed, D-Cedar Rapids, who was also at the event, expressed his commitment on the issue of wage theft.

“The very foundation of good business, and a strong economy, and a quality of life in our communities in Iowa, is that when that doesn’t happen,” he said.

Rebik said her organization has attempted to contact and meet with RockTenn to negotiate a resolution, but it has not yet received a response.

“No multibillion-dollar corporation should be paying poverty wages, let alone being in the business of stealing people’s wages,” she said.