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LAURA A. ODA/STAFF

A crowd of about 75 rallied Friday outside Oakland International Airport for transportation security workers' right to collective bargaining.

Airport workers fight to unionize

■ Oakland screeners rally for opportunity to be represented by labor organization

By Josh Richman

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OAKLAND — State and local political and labor leaders joined security workers at Oakland International Airport on Friday for a rally demanding union rights.

About 75 transportation security officers, union members and others chanted and waved signs near the airport's Terminal 2 in an event similar to those that have been staged at airports across the nation.

Joe Diggs — a national organizer with the American Federation of Government Employees, which hopes to represent airport

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screeners — said the workers have been “fighting for eight long years to get the basic rights of every federal employee and every American.”

By law, it's up to the Transportation Security Administration's chief to decide whether airport screeners can organize with labor unions. This was basically a nonstarter during the Bush administration, but unions have hoped for change under President Barack Obama.

Some U.S. Senate Republicans had opposed Obama's nominee to head the TSA, Erroll Southers, in part because he had refused to say whether he would authorize collective bargaining for airport screeners; Southers withdrew his name from consideration last month.

U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., had said unionization would put at risk the government's ability to make fast personnel decisions in the interests of safety: “We cannot give union bosses veto power over national security at our airports.”

California Labor Federation Executive Secretary-



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California Labor Federation Executive Secretary-Treasurer Art Pulaski speaks to a crowd of workers and officials gathered outside Oakland International Airport.

Treasurer Art Pulaski said at Friday's rally that airport screeners shouldn't be punished for the importance of their job. They “give us security every day we get on a plane, they've got our backs,” he said, “and because they keep us safe, they really keep America free.”

“But there's nothing that protects them” from poor wages and benefits and a high workplace injury rate, he said, adding Friday's show of solidarity by other local unions was a way of saying, “You've got our backs — now

we've got your backs, too.”

Organizer Steve Ayala, who has worked for the TSA at Oakland's airport for eight years, said he was “deeply, deeply moved” by the show of support.

During the rally, a parade of people walked through Terminal 2, applauding as they passed by the security checkpoints. Some blue-uniformed screeners smiled and waved at the procession; some didn't react.

Among those at Friday's rally were Alameda Labor Council Executive Secretary-

Treasurer Sharon Cornu; Assemblywoman Nancy Skinner, D-Berkeley; Assemblyman Dave Jones, D-Sacramento; Alameda County Superintendent of Schools Sheila Jordan; San Leandro Mayor Tony Santos and Councilwoman Joyce Starosciak; and representatives of Oakland Councilmembers Nancy Brunner, Jean Quan and Rebecca Kaplan. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka had been scheduled to attend, but snowy weather on the East Coast prevented his visit.

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