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Saint John's nurses claim intimidation



WORKERS UNITED: Nurses from Saint John's announce the filing of a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board on Wednesday.

BY KEVIN HERRERA - Editor in Chief

MID-CITY — Nurses at Saint John's Health Center who want to unionize have filed a third complaint with the National Labor Relations Board, claiming hospital managers threatened to arrest nurses who spoke about patient care at a recent City Council meeting.

Registered nurses held a news conference near Saint John's on Wednesday, saying hospital managers have continually harassed and intimidated those who have tried to organize, forcing nurses to communicate with each other behind closed doors with fear of losing their jobs. Some of the nurses have been working at the medical center for decades.

The latest complaint comes as the hospital faces prosecution by the labor board for allegedly violating federal laws by "interfering with, restraining and coercing" registered nurses by interrogating them and by forbidding them from wearing ribbons expressing their support for quality patient care, said Joe Newlin, a representative with the California Nurses Association (CNA), the union representing registered nurses.

A trial is scheduled for June 22, according to the CNA.

A representative from the National Labor Relations Board could not be reached for comment.

Nurses are calling for Saint John's to enter into a "fair organizing agreement," which will set up ground rules for an election in which nurses would vote for or against unionization. Nurses attempted to unionize six years ago, but the vote failed.

"The environment now is hostile toward nurses..." said Lori Hammond, a life-long Santa Monica resident and a registered nurse in labor and delivery at Saint John's for almost 29 years. "As we said before, [the decision to join CNA] is ours and ours alone and we would like to make it without fear or retaliation. An organization that so blatantly wastes important resources to crush the hope, dreams and spirit of its workers is an organization that in the end will destroy itself because they will be left with just shells of nurses, nurses that have no spirit of their own."

Representatives from Saint John's declined to comment.

Liz Baker-Wade, a registered nurse at Saint John's for 10 years, spoke at the City Council meeting last week, presenting a report conducted by nurses on patient care.

While that report did highlight some positives, it also focused on concerns about staffing ratios. Baker-Wade said in the days following the meeting, security threatened to have her arrested by the Santa Monica Police Department. Baker-Wade and other nurses said they spoke before the council because City Hall has a development agreement with Saint John's regarding the construction of a new facility and would like for elected officials to step in.

"The irony is that by threatening us for talking about an organizing agreement, the hospital administration has shown that an organizing agreement with fair ground rules is the only way that RNs' rights will be respected," Baker-Wade said.

Nurses at the press conference were joined by clergy from the community, including The Rev. James Conn, a former Santa Monica mayor.

The clergy members blasted Saint John's for not following the "Catholic doctrine." The hospital was founded and is owned by the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, which follows the healing mission of the Catholic Church.

"I believe that all faiths believe in justice and justice in the work place often has to do with organizing, but it always has to do with being able to speak your mind, being able to say what you think is wrong and to address those grievances," Conn said. "We know that healing happens because of the care of nurses, doctors and other professionals and that should be the focus of Saint John's."

Nurses said they are concerned about patient care and would like an avenue to address their concerns and have input in the decision making process. They would also like representation during employee evaluations.

There are roughly 530 nurses at Saint John's, according to CNA.