



CORONA: Labor Board Backs Nurses' Vote To Unionize

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BY IMRAN GHORI

The National Labor Relations Board has rejected a request by Corona Regional Medical Center to throw out a January vote by hospital nurses to form a union.

In a Friday, Nov. 15, decision, an administrative law judge with the federal agency overseeing labor practices said she found insufficient evidence to question the validity of the votes conducted Jan. 3 and Jan. 4. Nurses voted 155 to 116 to join United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Health Care Professionals.

"I recommend that the Employer's objections be overruled in their entirety and that the election results be certified consistent with these findings," Judge Mary Miller Cracraft stated in her 18-page ruling.

She based her decision on hearings held between March and July in Los Angeles that included testimony from nurses, doctors and hospital officials.

Union representatives on Tuesday, Nov. 19, called the decision a victory for Corona nurses.

"We applaud the judge's decision that the hospital's attempts to block the nurses from having a voice had no merit," said Jeff Rogers, a spokesman for the union. "Now we call on hospital management to honor the wishes of the nurses by sitting down with them to bargain over their concerns."

The hospital has until Nov. 29 to challenge the decision, which could result in another lengthy appeal process.

Mark Uffer, CEO for the medical center, said the hospital is still studying the decision and that it's too soon to say what it will do.

"Certainly, we respect the legal process and the court's decision," he said. "At this point we need to evaluate what the next steps would be."

Jeannine Wakehouse, a nurse in the recovery unit, said the unionization effort was about improving patient safety and nurses' working conditions.

"We fought a long time," she said. "It's been almost a year we've been waiting for this."

In its objections, the hospital claimed irregularities with the voting that included interference by pro-union physicians and appeals to racial prejudice.

The hospital alleged that at least five physicians – who are independent practitioners – made comments to nurses urging a yes vote, stating that a union would protect them. That had the result of pressuring nurses and interfering with the election, according to the hospital objections.

But Cracraft said those were isolated comments made in casual conversation and she found no evidence that those statements were heard by others or had any affect on the vote. She also cited the testimony of one physician about the hospital atmosphere at the time where the upcoming union vote was all that nurses and doctors were talking about.

The judge called it part of the "general mix of conversations" during the period. She also noted that the hospital "campaigning vigorously against unionization."

In the month leading to the vote, the hospital held staff meetings at which the then-CEO, the chief nursing officer and a consultant it hired urged no votes. Nurses were shown an anti-union video, vote no stickers were worn by managers and literature was posted at the hospital and mailed to nurses' homes urging a no vote.

In another objection, the hospital accused the union of appealing to racial prejudices, citing testimony by one nurse that a union official told her many of the union supporters were Filipinos.

But Cracraft said the nurse testified that it may have been her who drew attention to a photo of union supporters that included Filipinos and the union representative responded affirmatively.

In any case, the judge said the comments "were not made to inflame racial prejudice but rather constituted a mere statement of fact."

Cracraft said the labor board does not set aside unionization votes lightly but requires that elections be held in an atmosphere that allows free choice. She said she found no evidence that the Corona vote violated those rules.