

Source: Daily Labor Report: All Issues > 2009 > March > 03/20/2009 > News > Health Care Employees: SEIU, California Nurses' Union Bury Hatchet, Agree to Cooperate on Organizing, Bargaining

52 DLR A-1

Health Care Employees

SEIU, California Nurses' Union Bury Hatchet, Agree to Cooperate on Organizing, Bargaining

Ending a bitter battle that has been played out in the public over the past year, the Service Employees International Union and the California Nurses Association/National Nurses Organizing Committee March 19 announced that they have reached an agreement to work together on organizing health care employees around the country and bargaining with common employers.

The unions also announced a joint endorsement of measures to allow states to adopt single-payer, or an expanded Medicare-for-all plan, as a comprehensive, cost-effective overhaul of the health care system.

The two unions plan to launch an intensive national organizing campaign with the immediate focus on the nation's largest hospital systems including Tenet Healthcare Corp., HCA, and Catholic hospital chains, according to CNA Executive Director Rose Ann DeMoro. CNA/NNOC will organize the RNs and SEIU will organize all other hospital workers.

Florida to Be 'Ground Zero' for Organizing

In Florida, the unions will create a joint organization to represent current RNs of both unions and to organize other unrepresented nurses. In every other state, SEIU will continue to represent its current RN members in collective bargaining.

The parties decided to work together to organize nurses in Florida because nurses employed by major corporate hospital chains in the state are largely unorganized, SEIU President Andy Stern told BNA March 19. "We think we can do better together [than separately] in Florida," he said.

DeMoro said Florida will be "ground zero of this new relationship," with the hospitals in the state being a major organizing target.

According to Stern, with the country and the health care system "beginning a transformation," the two unions decided that they needed to have unity in order to influence how the transformation occurs. By working together, the unions can put all

health care workers in the “strongest possible position to define reform, move legislation and make the new health care system operational,” he said. “This also is a dramatic opportunity to increase the number of unionized workers” in hospitals, Stern added.

This is a “seminal moment” where the “right to join a union” through passage of the proposed Employee Free Choice Act (H.R. 1409, S. 560) and overhaul of the health care system are within reach, DeMoro said. CNA/NNOC and SEIU have “been in a family feud that has gone on for a long time,” she said, adding that it is “foolish” at this time not to work together.

Unions Won't Raid Each Others' Members

SEIU and CNA/NNOC have competed with each other over the years to organize registered nurses. SEIU currently represents some 80,000 nurses, while CNA/NNOC represents some 85,000 nurses.

As part of the new agreement, both unions will refrain from seeking to raid members of the other union or from interfering in the other's internal affairs.

The two unions have had a rocky relationship, at times working together and at times engaging in bitter disputes. The most recent dispute intensified last March after CNA organizers went to Ohio less than a week before scheduled elections for 7,700 workers at nine Catholic Healthcare Partners (CHP) facilities and distributed leaflets accusing the hospital system and SEIU of having reached an illegal “back room” deal that compromised workers' rights. SEIU and CHP cancelled the elections, contending that a fair election was not possible because of CNA's actions (48 DLR A-15, 3/12/08).

Weeks later, several busloads of SEIU members and staff from around the country demonstrated at a national labor conference in Dearborn, Mich., where DeMoro was scheduled to speak, against CNA/NNOC's actions in Ohio (72 DLR A-11, 4/15/08).

Four days after the Dearborn incident, CNA/NNOC sought and obtained a temporary restraining order against Stern and all SEIU staff ordering them “to cease and desist from stalking and harassing officers, directors, and staff of the nurses' union” (75 DLR A-1, 4/18/08). In August, a California judge found that the petition seeking the TRO violated the state's Strategic Lawsuit to Prevent Public Participation (SLAPP) law (159 DLR A-2, 8/18/08)

When asked whether the new agreement resolves the Ohio dispute, both DeMoro and Stern said it did, but declined to discuss how. DeMoro said the details still are being worked out, while Stern said the union needs to talk to the affected workers. He added that both SEIU and CNA want to make sure that the workers involved end up with a union.

The agreement also calls for the two unions to engage in joint bargaining with common

employers and to work together on a broad range of other issues, including passage of the Employee Free Choice Act.

Implications for National Nurses' Union

The agreement between SEIU and CNA/NNOC came just three weeks after the announcement that CNA/NNOC, the United American Nurses, and the Massachusetts Nurses Association are banding together to form a national RN union—the United American Nurses/National Nurses Organizing Committee—with 150,000 members (31 DLR AA-1, 2/19/09).

In a joint statement announcing the CNA/NNOC-SEIU deal, DeMoro said “this agreement provides a huge spark for the emergence of a more powerful, unified national movement that is needed to more effectively challenge healthcare industry layoffs and attacks on RN economic and professional standards and patient care conditions. It will also strengthen the ability of all direct care RNs to fight for real healthcare reform and advocate for improved patient care conditions and stronger patient safety legislation from coast to coast.”

The joint statement also said the creation of a “larger, stronger, national nurses union and RN movement, with sweeping implications for improving RN standards and patient care protections, is greatly hastened” with the agreement between SEIU and CNA/NNOC.

CNA/NNOC spokesman Chuck Idelson told BNA that his union is “looking forward to having a unified national voice of nurses with the support of SEIU’s RNs on the critical issues of nurse-to-patient ratios, high standards for nurses, and improved patient care.”

Julie Pinkham, the executive director of the Massachusetts Nurses Association, told BNA that the agreement between CNA/NNOC and SEIU “fits with what is already happening here in Massachusetts” where MNA and SEIU have worked together at the state level on behalf of nurses.

Pinkham said if the national RN union, after it is formed, is able to move “the agenda for nurses,” it would “make sense” for SEIU to allow its RN members to join the new national union.

Linda Slattengren, president of the Minnesota Nurses Association, released a statement expressing support for the agreement between SEIU and CNA/NNOC. “As a result of this agreement, we anticipate building upon the work we have done with SEIU nurses in the Midwest and continuing the positive working relationship we have with all SEIU workers in Minnesota,” she said. MNA, as an affiliate of the United American Nurses, has been an active participant in the talks to create the new RN union.

Health Care Policy

With the debate on overhauling the national health care system expected to heat up this year, as part of their agreement the two unions publicly endorsed measures to allow states to adopt single-payer health care systems.

Both unions have been supporters of a single-payer plan, but have had “tactical differences on how to get there fastest,” according to DeMoro. “This will give us an opportunity to put our combined power behind state options,” she added.

Stern said SEIU has one overriding goal and that is the “status quo on health care is not acceptable.” He added that he thinks that change can be made more quickly at the state level than the federal level, which is why the unions are endorsing allowing states to adopt single payer systems.

By Michelle Amber