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Hospital union election decision delayed to Nov. 2

By D. Ashley Furness, Business Journal Staff Reporter

SANTA ROSA, CALIF. – The Oct. 26 hearing intended to schedule the long-awaited union election for Memorial Hospital workers has been delayed until Nov. 2, according to a National Labor Relations Board official who said one of the union's attorneys could not attend the meeting.

About 600 Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital nursing assistants, respiratory therapists, radiology and other health care-related technicians have tried for more than six years to schedule an election for labor representation, but a clash between two unions both claiming a majority of worker support has caused the latest delay in the proceedings over the last five months.

The Service Employees International Union's California branch launched the initial effort years ago, but appeared to back out of the process following a reorganization of the Northern California division, according to local workers and a letter from the North Bay Labor Council.

In April, the recently-formed National Union of Healthcare Workers compiled a new petition of Memorial workers and was approved for an election. The new group was created by former SEIU Northern California leaders who resigned from the union in January after they were removed from leadership.

SEIU has since renewed interest in the organizing Memorial workers, asking to be added on the ballot. The labor relations board approved the addition, but then union officials twice filed complaints that effectively stalled the hearing for five more months.

The most recent complaint charged conflict of interest by NUHW's attorney. SEIU sent a complaint to the local labor board and filed for an injunction with a state court. On Oct. 23, the injunction was denied by a court.

NLRB San Francisco assistant to the regional director Tim Peck said the Nov. 2 meeting will likely center on dispute over election terms. If the two come to agreement, the election can be scheduled.

The local office of SEIU also recently received a third letter from community members concerned about their involvement in the Memorial election. The North Bay Labor Council delivered a request Sept. 29 asking SEIU stand down from the election, followed by a similar letter from about 75 workers on Oct. 8.

Last week, about a dozen religious leaders delivered a letter to SEIU leaders asking that they agree to negotiate fair ground rules. An SEIU official spokesman said the labor group has agreed to negotiate, but only if NUHW is not included. St. Joseph Health System Sonoma County, which operates the hospital, has said it will only negotiate if both parties participate. NUHW said it will negotiate the rules if SEIU is willing.