

Hospitals accused of labor violations

By Alison Hewitt, Staff Writer

Article Launched: 12/27/2007 08:09:30 PM PST

The Citrus Valley hospital group faces a hearing as a result of charges by unionizing employees that the hospital engaged in unfair labor practices.

Service Employees International Union United Healthcare Workers-West and its supporters accused the hospitals of violations such as interrogating union supporters and selectively using anti-loitering rules only against union supporters.

Citrus Valley Medical Center denied all the accusations of unfair labor practices, calling them typical union tactics.

"They made a lot of allegations that are untrue," said Lisa Foust, vice president of human resources for Citrus Valley Health Partners. "Unions file charges against employers all the time ... but they are allegations, and saying something happened doesn't mean it did."

Citrus Valley will face a hearing before the National Labor Relations Board in February as a result of the complaint filed earlier this month. The charges target the group's Covina and West Covina hospitals and include:

discriminatory enforcement of loitering rules to keep union supporters from staying after work to talk about the union,

selective enforcement of a solicitation ban to prevent union supporters from discussing the union,

threatening employees that they would lose benefits if they unionized,

and interrogating employees about their support for the union.

SEIU-UHW West has been trying to unionize the hospital for more than a year, prompting some employees to form the anti-union Citrus Valley Family Group. Each side claims it has hundreds of supporters.

"The workers, through the union, filed ... unfair labor practices charges a couple of months ago, and the board agent has decided that our charges have enough merit to go forward," SEIU-UHW spokesman Mason Stockstill said.

In general, about one-third of the charges filed with the NLRB are determined to have merit, said William Pate, a regional attorney for the NLRB in Los Angeles.

Sherry Johnson, a nurse at Citrus Valley's Queen of the Valley campus in West Covina, is part of the organizing community for the union. The ban on solicitation is only invoked when employees discuss the union, she said.

"We can talk about selling Avon, or going on vacation or 'American Idol,' but we're not allowed to talk about the union," Johnson said.

When she heard that hospital representatives were visiting employees on their lunch breaks to dissuade them from joining the union, she tried to visit the hospital during lunch, even though she works the night shift. Suddenly, the loitering rule was applied, she said.

"They had the security bring the guard dog into the cafeteria and sit behind me like I'm a criminal, and then my boss came in and my boss and the security and the guard dog escorted me off the premises," Johnson said.

"But we just had a Christmas party ... and a lot of us came in on our night off, and no one told us to leave," she added.

Cesar Buenaflor, a union supporter who handles the sterilization of equipment at the West Covina hospital, said an administrator quizzed him about his position on unionization.

But members of Citrus Valley Family Group say it's the union that's playing dirty.

Citrus Valley has worked hard to make sure managers are familiar with the National Labor Relations Act, Foust said.

"We believe they have done a good job following it and educating employees," she said. "(The union's) allegations are false."

In a previous interview about the unionization battle, Nena LaScala, a pharmacy technician at Citrus Valley's Intercommunity campus in Covina, said some employees feel harassed by the union.

"They're not allowed to come into the hospitals because it's considered solicitation, and all the hospitals have a very strict no-solicitation policy," LaScala said. "We've had to take union reps off of nursing floors, and even out of a patient's room."

Foust said the charges that SEIU-UHW and employees have levied against the medical group are a pressure tactic.

"There are hundreds and hundreds of employees that feel SEIU is exploiting the situation and using the newspaper and other pressure tactics to get us to bend to their will," Foust said. "We will not sell out our employees like that. They get to decide, not the union and not the employer."

alison.hewitt@sgvn.com
(626) 962-8811, Ext. 2730