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Kaiser Permanente workers vote to split from giant Service Employees International Union

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Kaiser Permanente healthcare workers throughout Southern California have voted overwhelmingly to quit the giant Service Employees International Union and join a smaller rival union, according to election results released today.

The National Labor Relations Board, which tallied secret-ballot votes cast earlier this month, said that about 2,000 nurses and care professionals voted more than 6 to 1 in favor of ditching the SEIU and affiliating with the rival National Union of Healthcare Workers, a breakaway faction that is challenging the SEIU's dominance.

The defeat is a major setback for SEIU, the largest hospital and healthcare workers union in California, with some 150,000 members. The SEIU is engaged in a fierce battle for workers' allegiance with the emergent NUHW, headed by former SEIU leaders ousted a year ago in a bitter takeover.

The breakaway NUHW, which doesn't yet have a single member under contract, has accused the SEIU of shutting workers out of negotiations and cutting deals with management -- allegations the larger union denies.

The SEIU calls its insurgent rival irresponsible and ill-equipped to represent workers. The row has split union and Democratic Party activists statewide.

Kaiser workers at scores of facilities in Southern California voted this month, both by mail and in person. Among those casting ballots were registered nurses at Kaiser's Los Angeles Medical Center on Sunset Boulevard.

A total of 746 nurses voted to join NUHW, according to the labor board, while 36 cast ballots to remain with SEIU. Healthcare professionals voted 189 to 29 to join NUHW, while psychiatric and social service workers favored NUHW 717 to 92, according to the labor board.

"This is the beginning of a shift in the labor movement nationwide toward more democratic, member-driven representation, not leadership from the top down," said David Mallon, a psychiatric social worker with Kaiser in Norwalk who favored NUHW.

NUHW is now setting its sights on some 50,000 other Kaiser workers across California currently represented by SEIU. The upstart union is pushing petitions among workers throughout the state to supplant the colossal SEIU, which claims 2.2 million members in North America, almost half in the healthcare sector.

Steve Trossman, an SEIU spokesman, called the results “disappointing” and accused the rival union of putting the affected employees “at grave risk,” because they are no longer part of a larger coalition of Kaiser unions.

NUHW officials scoffed at the notion of any risk and vowed to win better worker contracts than those negotiated by SEIU. Once the labor board certifies the results, the new union will be able to form bargaining committees.

-- Patrick J. McDonnell