

Coastal

Last modified Tuesday, July 31, 2007 9:53 PM PDT

Oceanside Coca-Cola workers to vote on union

By: BRADLEY J. FIKES - Staff Writer

OCEANSIDE -- Labor union leaders gathered outside the Coca-Cola bottling and distribution center in Oceanside on Tuesday, urging workers to vote in the Teamsters to represent drivers and warehouse employees there.

Teamsters representatives served hamburgers and soft drinks to employees from 2 p.m. until early evening directly across from the plant, owned by Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of Southern California, in the Ocean Ranch Corporate Center. A handful of employees came and went to the event during the day.

A secret-ballot election will be held Thursday by the National Labor Relations board. The outcome will be known that night, said Joe Rodriguez, a business agent for the Teamsters in San Diego.

Rodriguez and plant employees who attended the rally said that the cost of health insurance and wages were their top concerns. Slightly fewer than 80 employees will be eligible to vote in the election, Rodriguez said.

A majority vote will decide the election, said Rodriguez and Bob Phillips, a Coca-Cola Bottling Co. spokesman. If the union prevails, it will be recognized immediately, Rodriguez said. Those not voting include workers in secretarial or clerical jobs, and supervisors.

Rodriguez said the company doesn't want the workers to vote for the union, and was subtly encouraging them to vote no.

However, Phillips said the company will accept any result from an election conducted according to National Labor Relations Board standards, and is confident it will be a fair, secret ballot election.

"We respect the right of employees to form unions, or not to form unions, and employees have the choice whether or not they want to be represented by a union," Phillips said. "We believe it's a choice best made by employees in a secret ballot election."

Disputes between the bottling company and the Teamsters have led to three strikes in the last four years in San Diego and Los Angeles.



While in front of Teamsters truck, Teamsters organizer Wayne Lovett, right, from San Diego, stands with Coke-Cola workers Barry Chavez, who works in the warehouse, and truck driver Kerri Gray, during a rally for Thursday's vote on whether or not to unionize the workers at Coca-Cola in Oceanside on Tuesday.

HAYNE PALMOUR IV Staff Photographer



Teamsters organizer Terry Slagle, from Los Angeles, holds a sign while looking towards the Oceanside Coca-Cola facility across the street during a rally for Thursday's vote on whether or not to unionize the workers at Coca-Cola on Tuesday.

HAYNE PALMOUR IV Staff Photographer

The center opened Jan. 22 as a nonunion location. Coca-Cola Bottling Co. is a division of Coca-Cola Enterprises. The bottling company buys syrup concentrate from Coca-Cola Co., makes beverages at its plants, and then distributes them locally.

To get union representation, workers must vote in favor of a union. Those working at the plant include employees transferred from other plants that are already unionized. Others are new employees.

One of the transferred workers, driver Chris Refsnider of Fallbrook, said he wants the union because it will bring health insurance costs down.

It cost him \$30 a month for health coverage for his family when he worked at a unionized plant in San Diego, said Refsnider, dressed in his red and black Coca-Cola uniform. "It's \$400 a month here, and I can't afford it."

A call to the company to comment on the health insurance cost was not immediately returned.

Refsnider said a union would negotiate fairer pay standards, such as taking into account seniority on the job.

"I've trained people who are making more than me," said Refsnider, who said he makes \$19.80 an hour.

Besides health care, a union brings "a more respectful relationship" between the company and employee, said driver Antonio Johnson of Vista. Johnson said he noticed that when working at a unionized plant in St. Louis.

-- Contact staff writer Bradley J. Fikes at (760) 739-6641 or bfikes@nctimes.com.