

PMC union rallies in park

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"What do we want?"

"Contract!"

"When do we want it?"

"Now!"



Pocono Medical Center employee Sheri Bradley, right, a member of the negotiating committee, leads a rally of hundreds of PMC service and maintenance workers at Dansbury Park in East Stroudsburg on Saturday. The local unit of the Service Employees International Union is negotiating its first contract with PMC management.
MARK A. GENITO/Pocono Record

That was the rallying cry at a picnic put together by workers at Pocono Medical Center who voted last December to form a union at the hospital.

The 525 workers of Service Employees International Union Local 1199P said the situation became critical as duties were added to already heavy workloads and wages failed to keep pace with the cost of living.

After months of negotiation, union and hospital representatives hope to have a contract in place by Labor Day. Union members are looking for increased wages and benefits they say will help retain staff and attract well-trained employees.

Once a contract is concluded, the union will be known as SEIU of Northeast Pennsylvania.

Among the hamburgers, hot dogs and face painters were many who feel the union's time has come and that it was time for the workers to step up to the plate.

Sherri Bradley, a health unit coordinator in the hospital's pediatric unit, was one of the organizers of the event along with Danny Robb, a central sterile technician in the operating area.

"We need to have our voices heard," said Robb, who has worked at the hospital for nine years. "We need to be taken seriously and not be ignored.

"We are being as professional as we know how to be and work as hard as we can, but management is still stonewalling us," he said.

Bradley, who has worked at PMC for 16 years, said management has increased employees' workload without hiring additional staff.

"The more work that's piled on us takes time away from the patients," she said. "We need more staff."

"I love working at PMC," she added. "It's about patient care. If we didn't care, we would quit."

"We want the people to know that they are our first priority," she said. "When more and more responsibility is added to our positions, safety suffers."

Robb, who serves on the negotiating committee, said the union is "still in heavy negotiations" with hospital representatives.

"It's critical," Robb said. "We want to provide the best quality patient care. We want to help management do that. But we are the lowest paid medical professionals in the area."

State Reps. Mario Scavello, R-176, and John Siptroth, D-189, were invited to the rally, but were unable to attend because both are still working on the state budget in Harrisburg.

County Commissioner Suzanne McCool was on hand and described some of her experiences as a teacher in New Jersey.

"The union makes sure that you know where you stand," she said. "People need an advocate. In a union you have due process and the members know they aren't alone."

Dignity and working conditions are important because, when workers aren't treated with respect, they stop caring and safety and quality go down, she added.

"But it needs to be upheld on both sides of the contract. Collective bargaining is a very good thing. The contract empowers you," McCool said.

McCool also said that in 2006, Pocono Medical Center reported \$8.6 million in profits. Yet, she added, 45 percent of its workers earn below the federal poverty level for a family of four.

"That's just wrong," said Gregg Potter, president of the Lehigh Valley Labor Council, to loud applause. "They're stalling. It's anti-union 101. They want you to go away."

Potter, who works for Verizon in the Allentown area, said that "if we have forced overtime and we're tired and we make a mistake, we can usually regroup and take care of it. But if hospital workers have forced overtime and they're tired and make mistakes, people die. That's unacceptable."

SEIU 1199 is the nation's largest labor union with 1.8 million members in the health care, service and public service fields.

Neal Bisno, chief negotiator for 1199P, said that the union has proved what it can do when people work together.

"It is an outrage that a hospital with more than \$8 million in profits only gave raises to the people who were working at the federal minimum wage, and that was only because they were forced to by the law," he said. "It is an outrage that 45 percent of its employees live below the poverty level. It is an outrage that many of PMC's employees have poor access to proper health care."

"We want PMC to do well," said Bill George, president of the Pennsylvania AFL-CIO. "We want them to be big. But we also want them to be a good-paying hospital that takes care of its workers."

"Pocono Medical Center is not a neighborhood clinic. It's the largest health care provider in Monroe County. It's the only hospital in Monroe County. They need more staff and they need to pay better so they can draw better, well-trained staff," George said.

"What you do is priceless," he added, to applause from the audience.

Other pro-union speakers showed their support of the union and its members and encouraged them to stand strong.

"We will stand with you," said George, to loud cheers.

As the rally ended, someone handed a cell phone to Bisno as the members were cheering and he cheered into the phone along with those in attendance. As they stopped, he said into the phone, which someone said was dialed to PMC CEO Richard Henley,

"Can you hear us now?"

"I hope he can," a woman said as she walked away.