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850 Fountain Valley Regional nurses, employees to switch unions after 30-year affiliation



Fountain Valley Regional employees Tuesday watch the results of a vote count at the Sonesta Hotel in Fountain Valley.

BY SARA CARDINE, STAFF WRITER
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Hundreds of nurses, social workers and therapists at Fountain Valley Regional Hospital & Medical Center have voted to switch unions, joining the National Union of Healthcare Workers after seeing representatives advocate for members during the pandemic.

The results of a mail-in election conducted by the National Labor Relations Board indicated Tuesday 77% of those who cast ballots desired to withdraw from the United Nurses Assns. of California, which had represented them for the past 30 years.

Sue Tomol, a nurse who works in the post-anesthetic care unit, said although she and her colleagues experienced higher-than-usual patient loads and difficult conditions during the pandemic, they had little contact with union representatives.

“We saw what NUHW was doing for the employees they represented,” she said.

“They were supporting them. They were reaching out and following up. They were helping people get the things they were owed. UNAC never reached out to us.”

Workers of Fountain Valley Regional Hospital & Medical Center hold a rally outside the hospital in May 2021.

Workers of the Fountain Valley Regional Hospital & Medical Center hold a rally outside the hospital in May 2021. Nurses at the facility voted Tuesday to join the union that organized the demonstration. (Scott Smeltzer / Staff Photographer)

NUHW members held demonstrations during the pandemic, on behalf of 700 respiratory therapists, nursing assistants, technicians and emergency and operating room staff at Fountain Valley Regional, to highlight working conditions and needed improvements.

In a July 1 complaint filed with U.S. Department of Health and Human

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Services' Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, union representatives claimed COVID-19 patients had been distributed throughout the Tenet Healthcare-owned facility, while staff were assigned to treat both infected and uninfected patients.

State health officials investigated, issuing a 33-page report that called out "systemic" infection control violations and mandated mitigations. By late August, NUHW employees had negotiated a contract with salary increases and lower healthcare premiums.

Barbara Lewis, a NUHW Southern California hospital division director who helped draft the complaint, said nurses began reaching out to union reps late last year to ask if they might become members.

Christina Rodriguez during a rally outside of Fountain Valley Regional Hospital & Medical Center in May 2021.

Nurses and other healthcare professionals at Fountain Valley Regional Hospital have voted to switch unions, leaving United Nurses Assns. of California for the National Union of Healthcare Workers. (Scott Smeltzer / Staff Photographer)

"The nurses started organizing themselves and formed a committee,"

Lewis said, describing how 80% of eligible employees signed a petition ahead of the vote supporting the move. "The organizing committee is already scheduled to meet next week to plan the bargaining process."

Employees will remain protected by the terms of their existing contract with United Nurses Assns. of California, set to expire April 30, until a new contract has been bargained and approved, she added.

In an email correspondence sent to employees Tuesday, UNAC representatives said they would honor the results of the vote.

"Fountain Valley Professionals Assn.'s members have chosen to move in a new direction. [We have] heard your decision and we respect your choice," it began. "We've been here for 50 years and we're not going away. We are still here for you."

Tomol, who gathered with co-workers Tuesday in a Fountain Valley hotel for the vote count, said she played the Queen song "We Are the Champions" when the results dropped.

"It was so satisfying and gratifying to see the support we had," she said. "This was a Herculean task we took on, and we conquered it — this is history in the making."
