

NUHW, Machinists Announce Partnership, Taking First Step Toward Possible Affiliation

By Michelle Amber

The independent National Union of Healthcare Workers, which represents some 9,000 workers in California and Michigan, and the 700,000-member International Association of Machinists have signed a letter of intent to pursue a formal relationship and work toward a possible future affiliation, the unions announced in a Feb. 21 joint statement.

The letter of intent has been approved by the executive boards of both unions, and representatives of each union will begin to work on terms of a possible affiliation, according to the joint statement.

NUHW President Sal Rosselli told Bloomberg BNA Feb. 21 that over the coming months members of both unions will be involved in determining the shape of a potential affiliation and any final decision on affiliation will be subject to approval by the members of NUHW and the leadership of IAM.

IAM President Thomas Buffenbarger told Bloomberg BNA Feb. 21 that discussions on the terms of an affiliation are expected to begin within the next four weeks.

According to Rosselli, the NUHW executive board last November authorized the officers to seek a partnership with an AFL-CIO-affiliated union that puts a “high value on member democracy, on fighting for and protecting workers' standards, and on organizing the unorganized.” The union also sought a partner that would commit substantial resources to help NUHW unite health care workers in California and across the country, he said.

“In the IAM, we believe we have found the partner that will enable health care workers to achieve their dreams of building a strong, democratic, and progressive health care workers' union,” Rosselli said. “We look forward to working with the IAM to build a movement of health care workers, like IAM has done in aerospace, transportation, and other industries.”

Gary Allen, vice president of IAM, said NUHW and its leaders have a “strong, national reputation for honesty, competence, integrity, and militant, democratic, progressive trade unionism. Their record of success in winning industry standard contracts and organizing the unorganized speaks volumes.”

While Rosselli said NUHW has had conversations with a number of other unions about an affiliation, he declined to identify them.

IAM to Provide Resources for Kaiser Election

Rosselli said the partnership will help NUHW be in a stronger position to win at the bargaining table and to “build industrial strength in both the hospital and long-term care industries.”

Immediately, IAM will invest “significant resources” to help NUHW members settle fair contracts and help 43,000 workers at Kaiser Permanente facilities leave the Service Employees International Union and join NUHW in a rerun election expected to be held later this year, Rosselli said.

Buffenbarger added that with the resources IAM will be providing, NUHW will be able to “staff up” for the upcoming election and IAM also will provide “any help we can.”

In a 2010 mail ballot election, Kaiser employees voted to remain with the incumbent United Healthcare Workers West, rejecting NUHW, which was created by former officials of UHW after SEIU placed the local under trusteeship. Employees cast 18,290 ballots to stay with SEIU-UHW, and 11,364 voted to switch to NUHW, which petitioned for the election, and 365 employees voted for no union ([195 DLR AA-1, 10/8/10](#)).

Ruling on election objections filed by NUHW, a National Labor Relations Board administrative law judge found that SEIU-UHW had interfered with unit employees' free and uncoerced choice in the election by widely disseminating warnings that Kaiser was likely unlawfully to withhold wage increases and other benefits from employees, as it earlier was found by NLRB and a federal district court to have done in 2009 for employees in smaller units in Southern California ([243 DLR A-1, 12/20/10](#); [45 DLR A-2, 3/8/11](#)).

The ALJ recommended that the election results be set aside and a new election conducted ([138 DLR AA-1, 7/19/11](#)).

While NLRB last August ordered a new election be conducted ([155 DLR AA-1, 8/11/11](#)), the election has been blocked by charges filed by NUHW alleging that Kaiser should be held equally responsible with SEIU for corrupting the election environment. NUHW contended a fair election can not be held because Kaiser's illegal activity never stopped and is continuing. The charges are being investigated by NLRB.

IAM Has Weighed Involvement in Health Care Industry

According to Buffenbarger, IAM currently represents workers at some private hospitals in New York City as well as health care workers in the Long Beach City, Calif., Health Department.

This partnership with NUHW will provide IAM “involvement in an industry we've pondered for some time,” the IAM president said, adding, “we are an industrial union” and need to be thinking about “what does the future hold.”

He also said IAM has been looking at creative ways to provide health insurance for its members and hopes “we can introduce some of our ideas” in partnership with NUHW.

According to Buffenbarger, there had been some discussion with the Boeing Co. about exploring the creation of a regionalwide health care system in the Puget Sound area, with the parties employing doctors in clinics as a means of controlling costs, but the timing of the discussions was not right.

He added that there has been some interest expressed on the management side of other large companies to do similar programs, and Rosselli will be “well equipped to help guide” the union in some of these initiatives.