

Bargaining Update

The benefits and working conditions of our contract have been in effect and functioning since we decertified. Our members have been competently represented under the terms of our expired contract. No one faults our union's representational skills. But still the question, "when will we get a new contract?"

During this time NUHW has concluded bargaining new contracts with USC, Tarzana, Santa Rosa Memorial, Salinas Valley, and a number of nursing homes. Our union has done this without give aways, take aways, or a lessening of member power vis a vis the employer. We have successfully organized many new hospitals, nursing homes, and medical groups of workers, wanting a democratic voice in the affairs of their union. Yet the question rightly persists, "where will we get a new contract?"

To answer that question one has to look no further than the employer in question, Kaiser Permanente, and the personalities of the men and women who run it. We singlehandedly spoiled the plans they hatched with the Coalition leaders years ago to let Kaiser take away the employee pension and gut all employee benefits. Had we not decertified and joined NUHW; had we not stuck to our platform of no take aways at the bargaining table; had we not repeatedly struck the employer; had our bargaining team not spent nearly two hundred thousand dollars of its own money to sit month after month and slowly craft 95% of a new contract with the employer on all issues but the economic ones; had we stayed in SEIU we, along with all of the rest of the Coalition, would today have a national agreement with a 401K instead of a pension, a vastly inferior Flex health benefit plan, and retiree health would not be waiting for 2017 to be cut. It would be cut now. And it still would be ten years since we last had local bargaining! We spoiled the pudding.

The Coalition has concluded its whirlwind national agreement negotiations. Now there is the protracted pro forma ratification process. Then there follows the secret committee work without member participation that will render up the re-write of the tentative agreements where the vague language of the national bargaining document becomes contractual language. What that final National Agreement will look and sound like is anybody's guess. So, I can hear folks saying, "Yes, that is all very well and good, David, but when will we get a contract?"

Our contract is still in process. As I said above we have completed and signed TAs on about 95% of the contract. We will have no formal re-write of the contract when it is completed because unlike the national bargaining that yielded an "agreement" in need of changes after the fact, our contract will be composed of the actual signed tentative agreements that will need no rewriting. What remains for us in bargaining are two huge issues: First, the Professional Practices Committee that will govern how our collaborative relationship with the employer goes forward in the future in dealing with staffing, professional concerns, and patient care and second, the economics of wages, pension, and health care benefits.

In the last two sessions, May 17th and 30th, the Employer and we made proposals and counter proposals on the Professional Practices Committee. On this critical issue, central to our practice integrity and such issues as staffing and ethical patient treatment and care, we are coming closer to what we desire in a collaborative relationship with management.

On the 17th we suggested to the Employer that since the Coalition TAs were now in the process of being ratified that the Employer should be more forthcoming with economic proposals for us. To a person, the members of the management team said they had not been given the TAs by their bosses and that if they had seen them it was because they went to our NUHW website to access them.

When we met with the management on the 30th they initiated the discussion of economics by asking us to again come up with a new counter proposal because they could not reference the Coalition TAs as they were not yet ratified. In caucus we agreed to develop some cosmetic language changes to give the employer next bargaining session on June 28th when we meet again. However, we agreed to hold fast to the defined benefit pension plan as currently configured and to the classic health benefit program.

We are bargaining in good faith. Unfortunately up to now, the management team across the table is hamstrung by a lack of progressive instructions from upper management. Everything seems to be on hold until after final ratification of the Coalition TAs. At this point we are successful in preventing the roll back of our benefits and in fact are continuing to make progress. We will have a new contract, but just not yet.

Next bargaining session is June 28th, at Bellflower Independence Park, 10a to 5p. Feel free to attend.