

Union threatens strike at three Southern California HCA hospitals

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A union representing about 3,000 healthcare workers is threatening to strike at three Southern California hospitals owned by [HCA Inc.](#) -- West Hills, Riverside Community and Los Robles hospitals -- over staffing and forced overtime, according to Tuesday media reports.

The [Service Employees International Union](#) represents the 3,000 registered nurses, clerical workers, emergency technicians and other employees at the three local hospitals. The union said it will hold rallies and "informational pickets" at the hospitals where HCA is negotiating contracts to replace ones set to expire June 30.

The union says the hospitals are chronically understaffed and that staffing is dictated by company officials at HCA headquarters in Nashville, Tenn., instead of by local administrators. HCA denied the charges.

"Our hospital staffing is determined by hospitals based on how many patients they have and how sick they are, period," spokesman Jeff Prescott told the media, calling the union's actions "typical strategy" during contract negotiations. HCA operates about 180 hospitals in 22 states.

A California law mandates nurse-to-patient ratios based on type of care, and the union claims HCA works around this law by understaffing other specialties, like respiratory therapists, and forcing nurses into mandatory overtime. The union wants caregivers to have equal votes on a safe-staffing committee with management and a procedure for binding arbitration if the two sides disagree over staffing.

HCA (NYSE: HCA) is also negotiating a contract with Good Samaritan and Regional Medical Center in Northern California. Most of its hospitals are non-unionized.