

Union threatens strike at three HCA hospitals

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CHICAGO (Reuters) - A union representing about 3,000 healthcare workers is threatening to strike at three Southern California hospitals owned by HCA Inc. (HCA.N), the biggest U.S. hospital chain, over staffing and forced overtime, the union said on Tuesday.

The Service Employees International Union will hold rallies and "informational pickets" on Wednesday at the hospitals, where HCA is negotiating contracts to replace labor pacts set to expire on June 30.

The union says the hospitals are chronically understaffed and that staffing levels are dictated by company officials at HCA headquarters in Nashville, Tennessee, rather than by local administrators.

HCA, which operates about 180 hospitals in 22 states, 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 said, calling the union's actions "typical strategy" during contract negotiations.

The union represents 3,000 registered nurses, clerical workers, emergency technicians and other employees at West Hills, Riverside Community and Los Robles hospitals.

A California law mandates nurse-to-patient ratios based on type of care. The union claims HCA navigates this law by understaffing other specialties, such as respiratory therapists, and by 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 deadlock over staffing.

"Things considered normal in competitive industries should be considered abhorrent when translated into healthcare," said Dana Simon, a negotiator for the union.

HCA is also negotiating a contract with two hospitals in Northern California: Good Samaritan and Regional Medical Center.

Most of HCA's hospitals are non-unionized, but workers are also unionized at HCA hospitals in Florida and Nevada, Simon said.

Kaiser Permanente, a large non-profit healthcare system, is the biggest U.S. hospital system in California. Besides HCA, [Tenet Healthcare Corp.](#) (THC.N) also runs unionized hospitals in the state.