

Union wins plurality at Calif. Catholic hospital

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SAN FRANCISCO -- A union seeking to represent service and technical workers at Catholic-run Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital in northern California won a plurality in a hard-fought election.

In three-way balloting Dec 17 and 18, the National Union of Healthcare Workers received 283 votes versus 263 votes against forming a union. A second union on the ballot, the Service Employees International Union-United Healthcare Workers West, received 13 votes.

The outcome will not be final until it is certified by the National Labor Relations Board. The NLRB staff in San Francisco was reviewing 16 challenged ballots and hoped to make a determination soon.

"The NLRB may not certify the results until January, but it is really just a procedural thing at this point," said Sadie Crabtree, a spokeswoman for the National Union of Healthcare Workers.

Crabtree said it was unlikely the challenged ballots would be counted. Even if they were counted, it was unlikely that they would trigger a runoff, she said.

The election, culminating a six-year unionization campaign, was closely watched nationally as a test of labor-management relations in the Catholic health care industry. Santa Rosa Memorial is one of 14 hospitals in the St. Joseph Health System, which has been criticized by organized labor for policies that labor maintains thwart unionization.

The unionization effort has been supported by Catholic labor advocates, who argue that the employer should respect guidelines developed jointly by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Catholic Health Association and union leaders on free and fair elections in the health care industry.

In remarks before the election was held, St. Joseph Health System spokesman Kevin Andrus said the health system's stance on workers' decision to unionize was strictly neutral and factual.

"We support our employees' right to make an informed decision and to choose for themselves whether or not they would like to be represented by a union, and if they so choose, what union that should be," he said.

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