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Deaconess nurses vote to dump union

Registered nurses voted out their union at Deaconess Medical Center. It was a bold move Tuesday night by the 550 nurses, coming on the eve of Deaconess' likely sale to the largest for-profit hospital company in the United States. The final tally was 209 nurses voting to oust the powerful Service Employees International Union 1199NW and 184 voting to retain the state's leading union for health care workers.

"They think they have a white knight coming in," said Curt Williams, organizing director for SEIU.

Nurses who wanted the union out said they are ready to take their chances by ending the union's stormy four-year tenure representing nurses. "We just didn't want to keep working in such an us-versus-them atmosphere," said registered nurse Billi Jo Coy, who filed the petition to fire the union.

Added registered nurse Tera Tveit: "We know there's no guarantees. But the union couldn't make guarantees, either. "We're just fed up with how the union represented us to the community. They haven't acted like good neighbors."

Many nurses were riled by a union advertisement questioning patient care and safety at Deaconess after job cuts this winter. In a separate vote, Deaconess technical workers voted to retain SEIU by a 96-61 margin.

Shelley Peterson, chief of nursing at Deaconess, said after the vote that there are no plans to alter the pay, job status or benefits ;V such as vacations, sick time and retirement ;V of the nurses who will be working without a contract. Yet registered nurse and union backer Patti Parra worried that the nurses could be in for a tough experience. "People forget how scary it was here," she said of recent years when wages were cut and workers were laid off without the guidance of a union contract.

Community Health has offered to pay \$156f|million to buy Deaconess and Valley Hospital and Medical Center. The deal could be approved by state regulators this fall. The company operates more than 120 hospitals in 28 states; only a few are unionized. Many of the hospitals are in the Southeast and in small towns that don't have union legacies.

Registered nurse Kelley Leifer, a union supporter, said the vote reveals deep divisions remaining among the nurses when it comes to union representation. The mother-baby unit is considered a place where most nurses reject union representation. It's also the unit, some nurses complain, that has been spared heavy layoffs and spending cuts.

Leifer said Community Health will be expected to keep its promises regarding wages and job security. The union said Community Health will push to reach profit margins topping 8 percent. "But by the time Community Health Systems gets in here, they'll have spent or pledged \$100 million in upgrades, \$100f|million in taxes, another \$84 million to a foundation," SEUI's Williams said. "I ask you: What's going to be left for the workers?"