

County nurses dump old union for upstart

By David Mendell, Tribune staff reporter. Tribune staff reporter Stephen Franklin contributed to this report

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In a vote being watched by union leaders nationwide, Cook County nurses decided overwhelmingly Friday to join an upstart union in hopes to find fresh and aggressive leadership in their struggles with county management.

Nurses with the Cook County Bureau of Health Services voted 955-487 to be represented by the National Nurses Organizing Committee, an arm of the California Nurses Association, which established the NNOC a year ago and chose Cook County as its first major target.

In doing so, the nurses broke from their union of four decades—the Illinois Nurses Association.

As the vote was read by officials of the Illinois Labor Relations Board, jubilant nurses hugged and heaved cries of “yes!” and “free at last!”

”This is Independence Day for nurses of Cook County,” said Bernice Faulkner, a registered nurse at Stroger Hospital. “We have been oppressed, suppressed and depressed for too long.”

This was no routine squabble between two unions.

A feisty 58,000-member union that broke from the American Nurses Association in 1995, the California Nurses Association sees itself as a fresh voice for nurses. It is also willing to take on some of the six other unions that represent nurses around the country.

Organized labor hasn’t taken the threat from the California group lightly. The AFL-CIO, the umbrella organization for the nation’s major labor unions, recently added the group to its list of so-called raiders and urged its members not to cooperate with the union.

For the 7,000-member Illinois Nurses Association, the vote was important because, with 1,800 members, the Cook County unit is its largest.

INA officials said they would contest the validity of the vote, saying it was riddled with questionable practices.

But the two dozen nurses who gathered at the Thompson Center for the vote count on Friday said they were seeking new, more inclusive representation.

Cook County nurses were extremely unhappy with the contract that the INA reached with Cook County in June 2003. They also complained about the union's alleged failure to deal with understaffing and nurses' being shifted from ward to ward.

That contract expired in November, and the INA had been locked in talks with the county ever since.

Cook County nurses vote to switch unions

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By Jonathan Lipman
Staff writer

The 1,800 registered nurses working at Oak Forest Hospital and other Cook County facilities have voted to leave the Illinois Nurses Association and join a rival organization run out of California.

Nurses voted 955 to 487 to join the National Nurses Organizing Committee, in what that group says is the largest nurse union vote the country has seen in years. Nurses cast ballots over three days, and results were announced Friday.

"That's an overwhelming mandate, that's a landslide," said National Nurses spokesman Charles Idelson.

The election is the first victory for the group since its formation by the California Nurses Association, organizer Ted Cahill said.

Charlene Jones, of Richton Park, who has worked at Stroger Hospital for 12 years, said nurses have tried three times to split away over concerns the Illinois Nurses Association was not responsive to member concerns.

They only found success when they looked for an organization independent of the AFL-CIO, the national organization that oversees most large unions, Jones said. The Illinois Nurses Association is an AFL-CIO member.

In California, National Nurses has had success in forcing hospitals to increase nurse-to-patient ratios, which Jones said has been a chronic problem

at Cook County's three hospitals and many clinics.

"We've been worried," Jones said. "Nurses were working in units where they were clearly not competent in that area."

Like other county employees, nurses have been working without a contract since November. Jones said members were unhappy with their last contract and felt they were getting little information about this round of negotiations.

The Illinois Nurses Association has seen discontent rise among members and tried to stem the tide with a major shakeup in recent weeks, association executive director Tom Renkes said.

"I think what happened has happened over the last couple years, it's been a slow erosive process," said Renkes, who was named to his post last week. "We have a new face of INA and we just have to carry forward."

The Illinois Nurses Association will still represent about 3,100 nurses in union negotiations across the state, Renkes said.

The organization is meeting with attorneys to plan its next step, Renkes said, and has not ruled out a court challenge to the election results.

Cahill said nurses would start electing their representatives to the new National Nurses organization immediately and the group would not wait for the election to be certified by the Illinois Labor Relations Board.

"The Illinois Nurses Association needs to recognize that we have a clear mandate and not waste their limited resources on frivolous legal delays," Cahill said. "They delayed this election eight months."

Jonathan Lipman may be reached at jlipman@dailysouthtown.com or (312) 782-1286.