

TO JOIN OR NOT TO JOIN, THAT IS THE UNION QUESTION

Urgent Care employees await a union decision

Formed in 2008, Eugene Urgent Care has grown from one clinic near the University of Oregon to nine offices across Lane County. In the wake of this fast rise, a conflict arose about whether to unionize.

On Aug. 19, the workers at Lane County Urgent Care clinics voted to unionize for collective bargaining power in a 72-70 count. The National Labor Relations Board must certify this referendum.

After concluding hearings last month, management and staff wait for the NLRB's decision regarding 11 contested votes.

Lawyers for both sides presented their cases as to the legitimacy of each contested vote based upon such things as hours worked, position in the company or length of employment — arguing whether these employees qualify to vote for unionization.

Either way, advocates on both sides say an intimate work culture garnered over the past nine years is being challenged.

"This isn't like working for a large, corporate hospital. It is a small, tight-knit operation," long-time Urgent Care paramedic Kim Wick says. "I've worked beside these doctors and owners for years. We consider each other family here."

Staffers say this familiarity has made them reluctant to demand improvements to their compensation structure, but for long-time employees, this past year was the time to finally organize.

"We tried for years to change and be heard, but management has never offered consistent raises," paramedic Michael Cockerline says. "It was time to step up because I believe in what we do at Urgent Care."

On July 1, Urgent Care management faced its first formal challenge when union supporters submitted a petition to certify SEIU Local 49 as their exclusive bargaining agent.

Since then, each side has accused the other of going too far. Union opposition say they are put off by the aggression of union organizers' tactics, interrupting business hours and demanding paperwork from office workers. And union advocates claim that Eugene Urgent Care parent company ICCO required advisory meetings with union buster lawyers after they filed the petition to certify.

"They brought in these labor attorneys from Portland to tell us why employees shouldn't join the union," Wick says. "They bragged how they'd never not been successful in breaking up a union."

For ICCO, though, these mandatory meetings provided a forum to tell their side of the story.

"ICCO does not believe a union is in the best interest of our employees, our patients or our company," CEO Bill Clendenen tells *Eugene Weekly*. "I have heard from many employees that our company is a great place to work, and I was hired to come in and make it an even better place to work and to receive exceptional patient care."

Despite a close bond between the doctors who own Urgent Care and their staff, employees say ICCO has been reluctant to grant raises, provide extended benefits and apply a transparent pay scale.

"We have had representatives approach the board many times and they have refused to act," Cockerline says.

Clendenen contends that ICCO has provided systematic employee wage increases.

"In fact," he says, "we have provided employee wage increases in 2016 and 2017 that, for the significant majority of employees, were above the increase in cost of living as measured by Consumer Price Index."

Urgent Care union supporters oppose what they view as too much wage discrepancy in overall pay.

"You hear about trainees earning more than their trainers," Wick says. "That doesn't make a lot of sense. If we structure pay in a more equitable way instead, it should increase the longevity of employment."

She says there is no consistent measuring stick or evaluation for determining initial employee pay and raises. Pay instead depends on a number of random components.

"Which person hires you, who trains who, who your boss is, the location of the clinic where you work, all of these things factor into how much you're paid," she says.

Union opponents actually agree with this argument, but differ in their view of its effect.

"People deserve to be paid by how well they work, and raises are a way to do that," Urgent Care staffer Vanessa McBride says. "Not everyone needs to be equal in pay if everyone receives equal treatment."

Both sides of the union debate wait in limbo for the NLRB ruling, which could take anywhere from a week to two years to come down. ■

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— MICHAEL COCKERLINE, PARAMEDIC

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