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Sought Steel Workers' Help

Ex-NYSNA Rep: Fired By Union for Organizing Work

By DAVID SIMS

A representative of the New York State Nurses Association is claiming she was fired April 13 because she was active in organizing NYSNA's staff to join the United Steel Workers after their old union walked away last month.

"It's interesting that an association that professes to be a union doesn't give the same rights to its employees," Sonia Echevarria said in a phone interview. She charged she was dismissed because she vocally protested NYSNA's refusal to voluntarily recognize USW as the new bargaining agent.

Affected by UNITE HERE Split

Her dismissal was made possible by the departure of NYSNA staff's former union, Workers United, which disclaimed its interest March 19 as bargaining agent because of its split from UNITE HERE.

"We knew this was going to happen, so in the meantime we were exploring other unions to represent us," Ms. Echevarria said. USW, which represents the staff workers at the Public Employees Federation, was selected, with 63 of NYSNA's 66 staff members signing union cards asking to be represented by it.

"We asked NYSNA for voluntary recognition. They denied it, said they were not sure that was the wish of the bargaining unit," Ms. Echevarria said. "On March 23 we told them, we have 63 cards, why don't we have a neutral, third-party card count? They refused and forced our hand to go to the National Labor Relations Board."

Questions NYSNA's Rationale

NYSNA's reason for denying recognition, she said, was supposedly its uncertainty over which new union would represent the workers, as several had been contacted during the search for new representation. "There was no confusion," Ms. Echevarria insisted.

NYSNA Deputy Communications Director Randi Hoffman said in a phone interview, "It's a personnel matter, and it's not appropriate for us to share the details of anyone's hiring or termination."

The NLRB will now conduct a mail ballot, which Ms. Echevarria seemed confident would confirm USW as the



SONIA ECHEVARRIA: NYSNA hypocrisy showing.

bargaining agent. Ballots will be counted May 11.

But days after the dispute, the contract negotiated under Workers United was dissolved and the conditions of employment for NYSNA staff were unilaterally changed, she alleged.

Benefits like compensatory time, paid lunches for staffers working in the field and grievance procedures were done away with. "They considered us at-will employees at that point," Ms. Echevarria said.

Confidentiality Dispute

She was fired over an e-mail sent to her chapter leader at Bellevue Hospital that NYSNA claimed included confidential information, but she denies the charge, saying it was her activism that cost her the job.

"Once we didn't have the union, it opened the door for them to fire me, and they did," she said. "I was instrumental in organizing us into USW. I'm very confrontational, I speak my mind, and they don't like that."

Now that she has left the union, she is free from a confidentiality agreement that all of its employees must sign to work there. Ms. Echevarria has filed an improper practice charge over the termination and hopes to regain her job, but either way says that

USW has an uphill fight in negotiating a new deal with NYSNA.

"This bargaining unit really has a big war in front of them, trying to get a brand new contract," she said. She called NYSNA's resistance to organized labor ironic considering its fierce campaigns on behalf of members. "They don't even practice what they preach; it's pathetic."