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Maryland Senate Passes Equal Labor Protections For UMMC Workers

Legislation passed today by the Maryland Senate will provide caregivers at the University of Maryland Medical Center the same labor protections enjoyed by workers at every other UMMS facility in the state and by the vast majority of workers in the United States.

ANNAPOLIS— The Maryland Senate voted today in favor of new legislation that will provide equal labor protections to 5,000 workers at the University of Maryland Medical Center.

The proposed law, an updated version of the Equality for Maryland Caregivers Act backed by 1199SEIU last year, solves a dilemma for UMMC workers, who are not covered by either federal or state labor boards. In Maryland, private hospitals fall under the National Labor Relations Board and public hospitals fall under the Maryland Labor Relations Act. The University of Maryland Medical Center is governed by neither.

“This is very important piece of legislation,” said Sen. Victor R. Ramirez, D-Prince George’s, sponsor of UMMS legislation for two sessions of the General Assembly. “It has taken a year but, in the end, we were able to make sure that UMMC workers have these labor protections.”

UMMC workers, who testified and met with state legislators last year, reported a variety of actions that at any other institution would be labor violations. These actions include employees being banned from discussing a union or union activities, workers being given the impression of surveillance as they attempted to explore collective bargaining options, and workers being threatened with a diminution of their work environment if a union is present.

As a result of their lobbying, the Senate finance committee asked the state attorney general Doug Gansler to issue an opinion on the matter, which he did in November 2103, writing that the Maryland General Assembly does has the authority to enact legislation subjecting UMMC to Maryland’s collective bargaining law.

The University of Maryland Medical Center is one of the largest employers in Baltimore and is considered the flagship hospital of the state-wide UMMS system, which includes more than a dozen facilities. UMMC is unique within the UMMS system because it is the only hospital under the direct control of the system-wide board appointed by the governor. Other University of Maryland Medical System hospitals are governed by their own separate

boards. When 1199SEIU testified in support of the legislation last year, the union displayed a large poster-sized map showing every hospital in the state, with only UMMC standing out as having no state or federal labor protections.

The legislation, Senate Bill 1104, University of Maryland Medical System Corporation--Governance - Medical Center Employees, attempts to solve this inequity by allowing UMMS to create a separate organization and board, not appointed by the governor, to oversee the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore and thereby allow the National Labor Relations Board to have jurisdiction over any claims or petitions presented by UMMC employees

Len Lucchi, legislative counsel for 1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East, cautioned during his testimony before the House Appropriations Committee that the NLRB “does not issue advisory opinions, so there is no guarantee” that the legislation, if it becomes law, will result in NLRB jurisdiction over UMMC. He added, though, that the proposed law “is narrowly crafted so that it is likely that there will be NLRB jurisdiction.” If this legislative remedy does not work, he said to legislators and UMMS officials present (including UMMS CEO Robert Chrencik), that 1199SEIU “will come back and see you again.”

Sen. Thomas McClain Middleton, D-Charles County, is also a bill sponsor. A House version is also pending approval.

“The Senate vote today brings us one step closer to what is fair and just for thousands of workers in Baltimore,” said Mary L. Washington, D-Baltimore City, a sponsor of the bill. “As elected representatives of the people of Maryland, we have a responsibility to insure that all residents have equal protection under the law.”

1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East is the largest and fastest-growing healthcare union in Maryland and the nation. We represent 400,000 members throughout Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Washington, D.C. and Florida, with nearly 10,000 members in Maryland. Our mission is to achieve quality care and good jobs for all.

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