

Labor supporters mark holiday with union gains in Sonoma County

GUY KOVNER

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT | September 2, 2017

A year ago, Patricio Estupiñan called the Teamsters, seeking help improving wages, equipment and job safety at the Sonoma County garbage company where he has worked for 25 years.

“We need to get respect. A better life, everything,” Estupiñan said Friday during a short break from driving a street sweeper in Cotati.

It led to a union organizing campaign at the Ratto Group, the county’s dominant trash hauler. In May, Estupiñan and his co-workers — about 400 drivers, mechanics, customer service reps and others — voted to join Teamsters Local 665.

The vote culminated more than 20 years of efforts by the Teamsters to unionize Sonoma County’s waste and recycling workers. It would be the first in a string of high-profile victories this summer by unions in Sonoma County, where an estimated 1 in 5 workers are represented by organized labor groups.

In June, the Santa Rosa Junior College Board of Trustees agreed to negotiate a deal that would set union rules and benefits for a planned large campus construction project, despite intense opposition from non-union construction interests.

Then, in August, more than 50 workers at the Hyatt Vineyard Creek hotel in Santa Rosa — housekeepers, servers, cooks, dishwashers and others — voted to join UNITE HERE Local 2850, a hospitality workers’ union.

“I’d say the union movement is alive and strong in Sonoma County and growing,” said Jack Buckhorn, executive director of the Santa Rosa-based North Bay Labor Council. “We’re going to fight for any worker who wants to have a higher standard of living.”

But some union rivals warn that gains by organized labor can come at a cost. They are focusing their opposition on efforts to impose union rules and benefits on major taxpayer-funded construction projects.

“People ought to be up in arms over the money wasting about to take place,” said Keith Woods, chief executive officer of the 1,100-member North Coast Builders Exchange, which is leading a campaign against so-called project labor agreements at SRJC. “This is a big battle.”

For many, Labor Day marks an unofficial end to summer, with barbecues and big sales at retail stores. Monday's commemoration, started by trade unions in the late 19th century and designated a national holiday in 1894, honors the social and economic achievements of American workers.

Union membership has been declining in the United States over the past half-century. Just 10.7 percent of the U.S. workforce was organized last year, the lowest figure since the Bureau of Labor Statistics began tracking it in 1983.

In Sonoma County, however, unions have retained a much stronger presence. Nearly 21 percent of the workers in Sonoma County belonged to a union last year, according to unionstats.com, a database constructed by two university professors who analyze BLS data and produce county-level projections. Two-thirds of Sonoma County's union members work in the public sector, largely local government and schools, according to their estimates.

It's nothing like the union concentration of 40 percent of the county workforce in the early 1950s, said Marty Bennett, a history instructor emeritus at Santa Rosa Junior College and local labor activist. The post-World War II boom of big construction projects was "a different era," he said.

But the advances by organized labor this summer may mark a turning point, said Bennett, who serves as an advisor to UNITE HERE and is co-chairman of North Bay Jobs with Justice, an advocacy group seeking higher wages for local workers.

"It may be a pivotal moment for labor," Bennett said.

Unions are targeting service industries in the North Bay that tend to hire immigrants, young workers, women and minorities for low-wage jobs that cannot be exported, he said.

Buckhorn said there are other "major organizing campaigns" underway in the county, but he declined to give specifics.

It is part of a regional strategy in the Bay Area and Silicon Valley, where unions are courting bus drivers, food service workers, security guards and janitors in the heart of the high-tech hub that has spawned a wave of affluent workers who are driving up rents and remaking the social landscape, even as the economy produces large numbers of low-wage jobs.

The state has estimated that more than half of the jobs created in Sonoma County between 2014 and 2024 will pay less than \$22 an hour, the minimum that two adults, each working a full-time job, needs to buy basic necessities and support two children without relying on programs such as food stamps and Medi-Cal, Bennett said.

The state's minimum wage is \$10.50 an hour, scheduled to reach \$15 per hour in 2022.

The median hourly wage for hotel housekeepers in Sonoma County is \$11.95 an hour, said Ty Hudson, a UNITE HERE researcher. Housekeepers at major hotels in San Francisco earn more than \$22 an hour, with good health insurance, he said.

Hudson declined to say what wages the union would seek for workers at the Hyatt Vineyard Creek since contract negotiations have not started. However, the union has been eyeing Sonoma County for expansion, Hudson said, noting that the Wine Country is also an “extremely lucrative” hospitality market but pays workers far less.

“We see the victory at the Hyatt as a step in a broader campaign throughout the (North Bay) area,” Hudson said.

Forces opposed to unions in Sonoma County are focusing efforts on preventing the spread of project labor agreements, which require large public and private construction projects to meet union standards.

To labor advocates, these agreements are a sensible way to set hiring procedures, wages, health and retirement benefits, health and safety conditions and other standards for complex projects.

Buckhorn said the labor agreements have been widely used at community colleges around the state, in building the Graton Resort & Casino and every geothermal power plant at The Geysers. In July, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors approved a project labor agreement used on a \$48 million project to build a mental health unit at the Sonoma County Jail.

“PLAs have worked for a long time,” Buckhorn said. “That’s why their growth has exploded in recent years.”

Critics contend the agreements curb competition, escalate costs and waste taxpayers’ money. They are sending mailers to 20,000 households urging them to pressure the SRJC board to reject the deal which remains under wraps with terms undisclosed. It could come before the SRJC board for a decision as soon as Sept. 12.

“It’s the camel’s nose under the tent,” said Woods, who claims that project labor agreements may end up being applied to all SRJC bond-funded projects.

Not so, said Frank Chong, the junior college’s president.

He noted the board authorized him to negotiate a pilot agreement with the Sonoma Lake & Mendocino Counties Building & Construction Trades Council, headed by Buckhorn, that could be applied to a single project, such as the upcoming \$23 million remodeling of Burbank Auditorium.

“Let’s see how it turns out,” said Chong, who acknowledged the contentious debate and said he is not taking a side. “Whether it’s built faster, cheaper, better.”

If not, Chong said, SRJC might not apply the agreement to future projects.

While pro-labor Democrats have dominated local politics, especially state legislative elections, unions themselves have maintained a largely “silent presence” in Sonoma County for decades, said Mark Gleason, secretary treasurer for Teamsters Local 665.

That era is ending, he said, in the wake of the votes to unionize the hotel and waste-hauling company.

“I guess we’re becoming a louder presence than we’ve been in the past,” he said. “We’re out there talking to workers.”

Patricio Estupiñan, a Santa Rosa resident who supports a wife and two grown children, said he makes \$24.70 an hour as a veteran driver, but works 60 hours or more a week, a pace he doesn’t want to continue.

“I feel good,” he said, contemplating his future as a Teamster. “I think everybody’s going to see a change.”

You can reach Staff Writer Guy Kovner at 707-521-5457 or guy.kovner@pressdemocrat.com.