

MEDIA ADVISORY FOR: Thursday, September 14, 2017

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Riverside County Employees Threatened by Management with 'Imprisonment for Up to One Year' for Trying to Protect Themselves after Two-Day Strike Highlighting Chronic Safety Breaches and Labor Law Violations

*SEIU Local 721-Represented Riverside County Workers Report More Illegal Intimidation
by Managers Threatening Employees with Jail Time for Using Pepper Spray for
Protection despite Mandate by Riverside County Board of Supervisors Expressly
Allowing Its Use*

Riverside, CA—Frontline public service providers enduring chronic safety breaches continually ignored by Riverside County officials are being threatened with possible jail time by those same managers who left employees with no choice but to protect themselves on the job. Management erroneously claims employees are forbidden to carry pepper spray at work despite county policy adopted by the Riverside County Board of Supervisors at their meeting on Feb. 7, 2017 [authorizing precisely these measures](#) (and others) in reaction to the tragic San Bernardino terrorist shooting on Dec. 2, 2015 that left 14 people dead and 22 people injured – of whom [ten of the fatalities and 14 of the injured were SEIU Local 721 members](#). An official task force convened in the wake of the attack had recommended the safety measures which the Board of Supervisors adopted – and which county managers now wish to unilaterally and shamefully disregard after having failed to keep their own employees safe. Indeed, just hours after employees brought pepper spray with them while returning to their jobs last Friday, county management at the Riverside University Health System (RUHS) Medical Center threatened workers with “imprisonment for up to one year” – in direct contradiction to the Board of Supervisors’ decree on Feb. 7, 2017.

As gubernatorial candidate and former Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa remarked: “When nurses are not safe, patients are not safe. No doubt, if nurses feel the need to carry pepper spray due to increasingly dangerous working conditions then something has gone very wrong. I have supported safe working conditions for nurses since serving in the legislature when I co-authored legislation to promote adequate and safe nurse-to-patient ratios. **Ensuring nurses and hospital staff have safe working conditions will benefit the entire community – and it must be a top priority.**”

Recent retaliation by Riverside County officials is just the latest example in a pattern of attempted intimidation by management of employees there. It comes on the heels of a two-day Unfair Labor Practice strike by employees protesting the county’s actions – which resulted in the union filing 19 labor law charges during the bargaining process, including surveillance and harassment of RUHS Medical Center employees who organized a self-defense class in April of 2017 after ER Registered Nurse Teri Lopez endured a violent attack by a patient, who repeatedly bit her and slammed her head into the ground. One of the claims of bad faith bargaining was that Riverside County – without explanation – yanked a safety proposal from the bargaining table despite incidents like the one experienced by RN Lopez. Workers pointed to the county yanking a safety proposal from the bargaining table, without explanation, despite incidents like the one experienced by RN Lopez as a particularly ruthless example of the county’s bad faith bargaining. Although front line employees continue to cite numerous examples of deadly weapons being confiscated while at work, county management refuses to install metal detectors at the RUHS

Medical Center door – even though a metal detector protects them and other top officials at the Riverside County Administrative Center (CAC). In response, Riverside County workers will speak up in defense of their right to be safe on the job – and against management threats of “imprisonment for up to one year” for exercising this right.

Who: Riverside County Employees, Community Advocates, Residents and Taxpayers

What: Press Conference against Threats of Jail Time for Workers Protecting Themselves

When: Thursday, September 14, 2017 at 7:45 AM

Where: RUHS Medical Center, 26520 Cactus Ave., Moreno Valley, CA 92555

Background:

Safety Breaches

In response to increasingly dangerous working conditions that have been continually ignored by Riverside County management, this past April, Riverside County employees hosted three days of self-defense classes at worksites across the county to equip workers with the skills needed to stay safe on the job.

The self-defense classes came as a result of an assault against Registered Nurse Teri Lopez at the RUHS Medical Center, where a patient repeatedly slammed her head on the ground and attempted to bite her on the back of her neck until a co-worker came to her defense. Nurses at the flagship hospital, at health clinics and at incarceration facilities repeatedly endure a working environment where patients can be mentally unstable, suicidal or homicidal – making basic safety measures indispensable.

Videos documenting the workers’ plight against unsafe working conditions and their call on Riverside County officials include [Thousands Deliver Petitions](#), [We Must Protect Ourselves](#), [KPFK Coverage](#) and [Riverside County Employees Resort to Self Defense](#).

Riverside County management responded to the worker-organized self-defense classes with surveillance of employees during their break time, breaking labor law to harass and spy on workers even as deadly weapons continue to be confiscated by nurses at the hospital.

Transparency

Among the long list of Unfair Labor Practices is the county’s failure to provide critical information needed to properly assess the levels of staffing and services needed to meet the public needs. Their lack of transparency was particularly criticized as county officials callously dismissed proposals to expand critical health and mental health care services but then handed out millions in taxpayer dollars to foreign consulting giants to essentially do the job that top county executives are already paid to do.

Workers and residents point to excessively long wait times and insufficient level of services needed to meet the public need, while county officials continue to deny access to the critical data needed to assess how public services are being compromised. At Riverside University Health Services facilities, the average wait time for patient in the ER before being admitted is eleven hours and ten minutes – while the national average is only five hours and thirty-eight minutes.

Revenue Waste

Time and time again, Riverside County has chosen to sacrifice vital public services and its frontline civil servants to balance budgets, while continuing to squander millions of taxpayer dollars on outside consulting contracts and millions more on a toxic swap deal they have yet to renegotiate.

The additional \$40 million recently given to KPMG consulting firm received criticism even from

County Supervisor Kevin Jeffries who [told the Press Enterprise](#): “Seeking external evaluations can be a valuable tool to make the needed changes. But when the bill due for those external evaluators actually starts costing you the loss of services to the public, you have to question who’s being served — the taxpayers or the consulting firm?”

“It is very clear to me,” Jeffries added. “That the additional \$20 million we are going to pay KPMG is going to come from taxpayer funds that could otherwise be used to pay for essential public services. This is happening at a time when we need every dollar we can find.”

At the end of the day, while lucrative consulting contracts are being expanded, vital public services are being shortchanged and public frontline workers are being asked to go without the additional resources needed to meet the public’s needs and to retain and recruit skilled service providers.

On the “swap deal,” approved by a body of Board of Supervisors that included Supervisor John Tavaglione, the county was sold on the idea of an interest rate swap as a means of achieving a lower “synthetic” fixed rate than could be achieved by issuing plain vanilla fixed-rate bonds. Riverside County was not alone in being duped into these swap deals; other municipalities like the City of Richmond, the City of San Francisco, and Jefferson County in Alabama also made similar dealings.

As a result of entering into this bad deal, the County has already paid \$48.9 million in excessive fees and is on the hook for up to \$20.5 million more until the deal ends in 2032, totaling a possible \$69.4 million in wasted taxpayer money. At the time the county considered this deal, it could have issued variable rate debt with no swap and saved up to \$69.4 million in bank fees over the life of this bad deal.

Unlike Riverside County, the City of Richmond, the City of San Francisco, and Jefferson County in Alabama have all successfully renegotiated the terms of their bank deals. To date, there is no record of the Riverside County CEO attempting to renegotiate the toxic swap deal with Wells Fargo in order to save millions that could be used for critical County services.

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