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HEALTHCARE WORKERS SUE SEIU FOR INFRINGING ON FREE SPEECH RIGHTS

Suit filed Tuesday in federal court in San Francisco

SAN FRANCISCO – Five healthcare workers and members of United Healthcare Workers-West have sued their Washington-based parent organization, Service Employees International Union, alleging violations of their federal rights to speak freely and to participate in union activities.

The suit, filed Tuesday in U.S. District Court, alleges SEIU President Andy Stern and other SEIU officials violated the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act, which expressly gives “every member of any labor organization” the “right to meet and assemble freely with other members; and to express any views, arguments, or opinions.”

SEIU officials repeatedly have asked for the removal of a Web site, www.seiuvoice.org, a popular forum for nursing home, hospital and homecare workers to share information about their union and its members with each other and the public.

The suit alleges this and other conduct by SEIU officials is designed to “limit, inhibit and chill the exercise of their rights of free speech and equal participation as active members and advocates for democratic policies within their union.”

“I have been a supporter of this union for more than 30 years. This is the first time in all those years that I’ve felt threatened or intimidated because of my union activities,” said Rosie Byers, a plaintiff in the suit and a San Francisco-based home healthcare provider. “I can’t believe SEIU is trying to take away my voice, to silence me. This simply must stop.”

The suit alleges SEIU officials have coordinated these attacks against UHW members as part of a larger effort to silence any dissent at their June 2008 convention in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

“During the time I’ve been involved with this union, I’ve never been afraid to speak my mind,” said plaintiff Michael Torres, a respiratory therapist at USC University Hospital in Los Angeles. “It’s utterly ridiculous that we’re now forced to sue to ensure that we have a say in the future direction of UHW.”

The 150,000-member SEIU United Healthcare Workers-West is the largest and fastest-growing hospital and healthcare union in the western United States and represents every type of healthcare worker, including nurses, professional, technical and service classifications. Our mission is to achieve high-quality healthcare for all.