Petroleum Helicopters' pilots land new union

Terry O'Connor
Business Editor

LAFAYETTE — PHI's pilots reversed course Friday by choosing to unionize.

The vote was 254-to-247 to join the Office and Professional Employees International Union. Two previous votes had failed.

"We are obviously disappointed but will move forward assessing all our options," said Carroll Suggs, chief executive for Petroleum Helicopters Inc. "PHI will work with its pilots and all our other employees to continue providing our customers with safe and efficient services."

Twice before in the past three years PHI pilots voted down unionization and Suggs had expected the issue to fail again.

"I certainly had great confidence that we would win once again," she said. "This is a crisis and all crises are an opportunity for good things to come out of it."

Unionization was rejected by just six votes — 254-to-248 — in the last attempt on April 1, 1995. In September 1997, 86 percent of the pilots voted against unionization.

PHI has seven days to appeal the decision to the National Mediation Board in Washington, D.C., which conducted the election. Suggs said an appeal is being considered.

"It is very appropriate to assess what our options are," Suggs said.

The pilots unsuccessfully appealed the outcome of the two previous PHI votes.

Negotiations won't begin until after the appeals process is determined, Suggs said. The pilots union leader, Stephen Runin, could not be reached for comment.

Suggs said a disappointing aspect of the vote is that it indicates a certain dissatisfaction in what she likes to call PHI's family.

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"I'm very grateful for the way the company has been run and its human resource activities and our commitment to our people," she said. "Obviously there were those who chose to feel they need representation to further their cause and beliefs."

Before the vote, PHI successfully challenged 32 of the 552 members claimed by the pilots. Only 520 pilots were ruled eligible to participate by the National Mediation Board.

PHI's business has been strongly affected by the oil field downturn as noted in its 1999 earnings report of a net loss of $2.3 million or total revenues of $382.3 million.

That compares with net earnings of $5.2 million and total revenues of $169.7 million for the same period in the prior year. PHI changed its year end from April 30 to Dec. 31 at the end of 1998.

Suggs did not hesitate when asked if unionization could affect PHI's stability or profitability.

"Absolutely not," she said.

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