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Solitude ski patrollers union organizers say better pay needed to keep experienced employees on the slopes

The ski area would be the first one owned by Alterra Mountain Resorts to unionize.



(Francisco Kjolseth | The Salt Lake Tribune) Skiers trek up to the Moonbeam Express for opening day at Solitude Mountain Resort on Thursday Nov. 10, 2022. The resort's ski patrol may become the first at an Alterra-owned resort and second in Utah to unionize.

By Julie Jag | Feb. 17, 2024, 6:00 a.m. | Updated: 5:13 p.m.

 Comment

Over the past two years, Solitude Mountain Resort says it has offered its ski patrollers a 42% increase in starting salary, an equipment stipend and transportation to and from the resort. Its patrollers say that's not enough.

They want a voice.

On Wednesday, Solitude's ski patrollers notified managers of the Alterra Mountain Resorts-owned ski area that they had submitted a unionization petition to the National Labor Relations Board. They also asked the resort to voluntarily recognize their burgeoning union. Though it had a week to respond to that request, a spokesperson for Solitude confirmed the resort rejected it Thursday.

"While we are disappointed in Solitude's decision to not voluntarily recognize our union," patroller Robbie Kosinki wrote Thursday in a text to the Tribune, "we are excited to prevail during a union election and begin bargaining a contract."

Kosinki said he expects a vote before the end of the month. If a majority of patrollers choose to unionize, the resort will have no option but to recognize the union. Of the 37 full-time and part-time patrollers at Solitude, Kosinki said 94% have signed union authorization cards.

"We just want to have a voice at the table with our employer," said Kosinki, 25, who, as a hill captain, is one of the ski patrol managers. "Right now we don't feel like we're being heard."

In addition to the opportunity to bend management's ear, the patrollers are pursuing better pay with a more transparent salary structure and incentives for further training and education, as well as health care benefits. The goal, Kosinki said, is to have the resort recognize that patrollers — who must be certified EMTs — are looking for a career, not just a winter job.

The patrollers, who are calling themselves the Solitude Ski Patrollers Association, could become the

unionize, following in the footsteps of the Park City Professional Ski Patrol Association, which formed nearly 10 years ago.

If they unionize, they will become part of CWA Local 7781, also known as the United Professional Ski Patrols of America. That local also includes the patrol at Steamboat and the patrol and the lift maintenance crew at Park City Mountain. Patrols at two other resorts, [Whitefish in Montana](#) and [Eldora in Colorado](#), have also recently petitioned to be in the same local union.

Max Magill, the president of CWA Local 7781 and a Park City patroller, said the union's membership has swelled since both Park City and Telluride's patrols joined during the 2015-16 season. At that time, he said, it included four ski patrols and roughly 300 employees. Now it's closer to 12 "bargaining units" — including lift mechanics and bike patrols — and 800 employees.

"It appears that there's a snowball that's starting to roll down the mountain and is gathering more snow as it goes," Magill said. "It does feel like it's a movement."

(Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune) Park City Mountain Resort ski patrollers hike the boot-pack path toward the ski area exit gate on the ridge above the Ninety-Nine 90 lift on Wednesday, Feb. 24, 2021. Access to the gate was closed after two men died in avalanches in the adjacent unmaintained backcountry areas after leaving the resort through that point.

Magill linked the increased interest to more resorts falling into the hands of corporate owners. Vail Resorts owns more resorts, including Park City Mountain, than any other company in the world. Alterra, the parent company of both Solitude and Deer Valley in Utah, is second on that list with what will soon be 18 resorts in its stable. Alterra is owned by the private equity firm KSL Capital Partners and the investment firm Henry Crown and Company.

"As we've seen the ski industry become more corporatized," he said, "it seems to be in the best interest of a lot of employees to be able to support their managers and really take a seat at the table and be able to ask for the things that they need to retain employees to provide guests with the best experience possible."

Two years ago, [Solitude reached an agreement with a ski patroller](#) who had complained to the NLRB

Solitude's chief operating officer, Amber Broadaway, that called for a more transparent wage scale and overtime pay, among other perks — benefits Solitude's current patrollers are also pursuing.

As part of the agreement, Solitude agreed to post signs informing employees of their legally protected right "to form, join or assist a union." It also improved overtime policies and included patrollers when it raised its minimum wage to \$15 per hour for all non-tipped employees.

The starting pay for a patroller at Solitude is \$21 per hour, just one dollar less than the starting wage at Park City Mountain.

"We are committed," a statement released by the resort said, "to providing competitive wages, excellent benefits, and an employee experience that is fulfilling, safe, and inclusive of opportunities for growth."

Sean Parent, a Solitude ski patroller for the past five years, said he's heard that before.

(Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune) Solitude avalanche dog Joni plays with her handler, Jasper Anderson, Thursday, March 5, 2020.

"That response is pretty copy-paste from what we've seen during onboarding," he said, "and our experience is actually very much the opposite."

Parent, 22, said whenever patrol managers ask for higher wages or bigger budgets, they are shot down. He said that leads to more turnover and has created a "green" patrol at the resort. Better benefits and pay bumps for specialty certifications, he argued, would allow the resort to retain more of its patrol. In time, he said, the resort and its customers would reap the benefits because experienced crews can often be more efficient at opening avalanche-prone terrain.

Magill said that has been the outcome at Park City Mountain, at least in his experience.

Kosinki said he expects Alterra and Solitude to campaign heavily against unionization. If fewer than half the patrollers vote in favor of the union, no changes will be made to the status quo. If the union gets the votes, Kosinki expects to start bargaining immediately. While that could include a strike — as the [Park City patrol threatened](#) after its most recent contract negotiations stretched out over 18 months — Kosinki said that’s a last resort.

In its statement issued Wednesday, Solitude said it is “dedicated to ongoing open dialogue with our employees regarding how we can continue to improve all aspects of their employee experience.”

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jjag@sltrib.com

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