



CAPITOL

A workplace safety board bucked Gavin Newsom. Now he's shaking it up



BY JEANNE KUANG
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Gov. Gavin Newsom speaks during a press conference at the Capitol Annex in Sacramento on Sept. 26, 2023. Photo by Miguel Gutierrez Jr., CalMatters

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IN SUMMARY

The California Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board is about to pass long-awaited rules to protect workers from indoor heat. The governor's office demoted the board's chairperson and removed another member who criticized the administration.

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Gov. Gavin Newsom has removed one member and demoted the chairperson of a state workplace safety board who criticized his administration's handling of a proposed heat protection rule this year.

The shakeup comes less than two weeks before the [Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board](#) is expected to approve the rule, requiring businesses to shield their [indoor workers from the risks of extreme heat](#). The state [spent years developing the proposal](#), only for its approval to be further delayed in March when Newsom's administration withdrew its support the day before a scheduled vote over cost concerns.

The two members who were recently reshuffled were among those most outspoken on the administration's last-minute move, which pushed back the rule so that it has not gone into effect in time for the first of this summer's heat waves.

[During the March meeting](#), board member Laura Stock called the action "completely outrageous" and said it "undermines" the board, while Chairperson Dave Thomas said the administration "set us up." Thomas suggested taking a largely symbolic vote to pass the rule anyway, in a public rebuke of the administration. His motion passed, unanimously.

Stock said she got a call last Friday from an appointments official in Newsom's office telling her she was off the board, effective immediately, with no explanation.

"It was very shocking. There was no indication that anything like this was planned," Stock told CalMatters of the call. "I was simply told the governor decided to move in a different direction."

Newsom also replaced Thomas as chairperson with board member Joseph Alioto, an antitrust attorney, the governor's office confirmed today. Thomas, president of a northern California construction union, remains a board member. He did not respond to a request for comment today.

Stock, a researcher and director of the Labor and Occupational Health Program at UC Berkeley, held a seat reserved for workplace safety experts on the seven-member board since 2012.

Her latest re-appointment was in 2020, and expired last June. It is not uncommon for state board and commission members to serve for months on expired terms before the governor's office reappoints or replaces them. Two other workplace safety board members — a labor representative and an employers' representative — are also still serving on terms that expired last June.

Alex Stack, a spokesperson for Newsom, wrote in an email that his office would not "comment further on personnel matters." No replacement for Stock has been appointed.

Stock said she did not want to speculate on the reasons for her removal and said she was proud of her work on the board. "The board passed what I consider groundbreaking, cutting-edge, essential regulations protecting workers from sometimes life-threatening hazards," she said.

But worker advocates said they are concerned about the removals.

Stephen Knight, executive director of the advocacy group Worksafe, praised Stock as "one of the most experienced voices for worker health and safety" and Thomas for leading the board through the COVID-19 pandemic. In those years, the board considered renewals of an emergency rule to reduce transmission of the virus in worksites, amid intense public backlash from proponents of reopening businesses.

"If the governor has a direction or vision for worker health and safety, it's not one that he's articulated, and we're all ears," Knight said. "We're concerned about what these surprise removals may mean about the governor's commitment to worker health and safety, and climate justice."

Administration officials have said they pulled their support from the indoor heat rule in March after discovering the rule would cost state prisons billions more dollars than the workplace safety agency estimated. But it has so far [refused to disclose its cost estimates](#) and denied a CalMatters request for public records relating to the costs.

The rule the board is scheduled to vote on June 20 is an amended version that exempts state prisons.