

Brief strike affects 15 hospitals

SUTTER HEALTH NURSES RETURN TO WORK FRIDAY

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Thousands of Northern California nurses began a two-day strike Wednesday at 15 hospitals in the region's largest such labor action in a decade.

With chants of "patients first, not profits," picketing began at 7 a.m. at 13 Bay Area hospitals and two hospitals near Sacramento. The Bay Area hospitals are owned by Sutter Health, a non-profit network of hospitals and doctors' groups.

Up to 5,000 nurses, represented by the California Nurses Association, voted to strike after the breakdown last week of months-long contract negotiations with several Sutter hospitals.

The strike is slated to end at 7 a.m. Friday.

Although the hospitals hired replacement nurses and promise business as usual, some patients have rescheduled procedures and appointments. Some of the striking nurses will not be able to return to their jobs for several days after the walkout because of hospitals' agreements with replacement nurses.

The statewide nurses union, a formidable political force, is seeking more control over staffing levels and improvements in health benefits and retirement packages.

"Sutter has refused to listen to the concerns of their nurses," said union spokesman Chuck Idelson. Many nurses "can't even take breaks a significant percentage of the time because of inadequate staffing," he said.

Officials from some of the Sutter hospitals countered that their salary and benefit offers were generous. They criticized the union's decision to strike all of Sutter Health's Bay Area hospitals regardless of the different offers from each hospital. The decision, they said, was driven by the union's desire to negotiate with Sutter as a single entity.

"We were just scratching our heads, baffled over the fact that our nurses were joining CNA" in the strike, said Jonnie Banks, spokeswoman for Eden Medical Center in Castro Valley. Banks

said the average nurse's salary would rise to about \$118,000 by the end of the hospital's proposed four-year contract, with fully paid health benefit premiums for nurses and their families.

Banks said about 19 percent of the hospital's 600 nurses reported to work on Wednesday.

Staffing issues are at the heart of other nursing strikes around the country, including current strikes in Kentucky and West Virginia and a walkout expected next week at a Maine hospital.

On Wednesday's picket line at Eden Medical Center, nurse Tina Simon said nurses on some floors routinely go without lunch and other breaks because the hospital has no one to relieve them.

"This is a very stressful job," said Simon, who has worked for the hospital since 1980. "I don't think a patient should have a tired nurse with low blood sugar taking care of them."

Liza Castaneda, whose daughter gave birth to a baby girl Wednesday by caesarean section, said the delivery went well.

"You could tell the nurses were fill-ins because a lot of people were having to explain a lot of things to them, but it was nothing where I felt uncomfortable," Castaneda said. "I hate crossing the picket line, but this is one of those things you can't put off."

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