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CNA issues strike notice to Sutter Health hospitals

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The California Nurses Association has delivered a 10-day strike notice to Sutter Health hospitals in Northern California for a strike that could take place Dec. 13 and 14, reprising an earlier two-day walkout in October.

Strike notices were sent Friday to some of the biggest hospitals in the region, including California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco, Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Berkeley and Oakland, and Burlingame's Peninsula Medical Center, the CNA/National Nurses Organizing Committee said late Friday.

Since an earlier two-day strike in October, contract talks have been held at most of the hospitals, but while some progress has been made "a wide gap remains on the central areas in dispute," the union said. Talks are scheduled at California Pacific on Monday, but no additional negotiations are on tap at other Sutter hospitals in the region, and two hospitals -- Sutter Delta in Antioch and Sutter Solano in Vallejo -- "have refused to hold any additional negotiations," according to CNA.

Earlier in the week, the Oakland-based union announced that RNs at 11 Sutter Health hospitals would vote this week on whether to authorize a two-day strike against Sutter "over serious issues of patient safety, safe staffing, nurse health security, medical benefits, pension improvements, and the continued operation of much-needed community hospitals."

California Pacific spokesman Kevin McCormack said the hospital has been expecting a second strike. "We're not surprised," he told. "We've been planning for this strike since the last one."

McCormack said the CNA has shown little interest in holding negotiations over the past six months or so, and hasn't made any proposals involving patient safety or keeping endangered hospitals open, preferring to posture in the news media. "They've shown no inclination to sit down and talk to us and no inclination to reach a negotiated settlement," he said. "They haven't made one economic proposal in over six months. This shows they're not interested in debate."

About 5,000 Sutter nurses at 13 hospitals walked off their jobs in October, in a strike that CNA described as the largest job action by nurses nationwide in a decade.

Nurses are protesting what they call "medical redlining" by Sutter, which has plans to shut down St. Luke's Hospital in San Francisco and its Sutter Santa Rosa facilities as acute-care centers, and possibly to close San Leandro Hospital as well. Compliance with nurse-staffing ratios, "meal-and-break relief" and health benefit and pension issues are also on the table, according to the union.

CNA insists that other health-care systems and hospitals in Northern California, notably Kaiser Permanente, offers better retirement medical benefits than Sutter's hospitals do.

"Their behavior continues to be abhorrent," CNA spokesman Chuck Idelson said.