

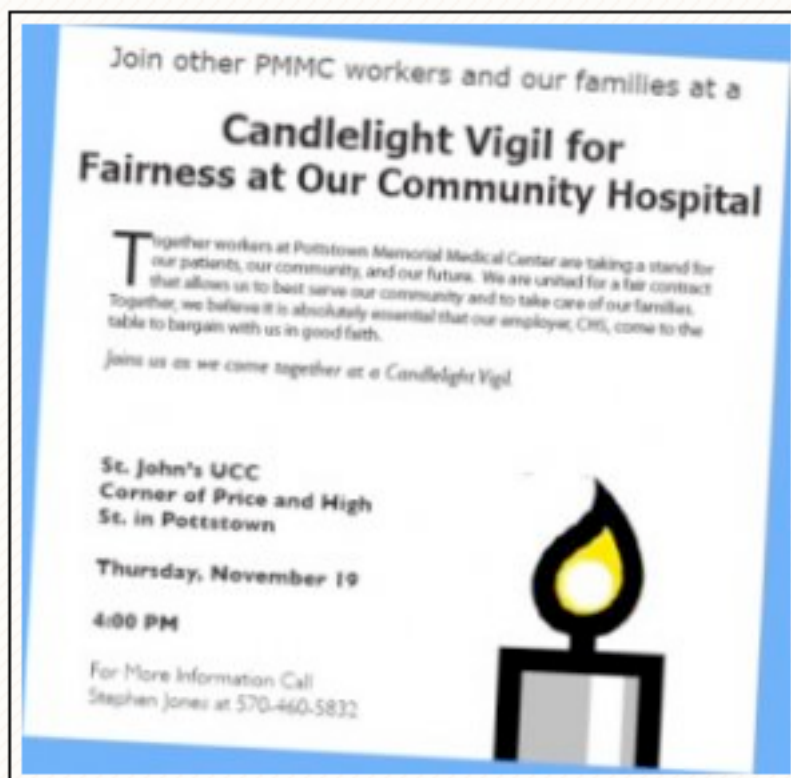
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Hospital Union Workers Call For Thursday Vigil

Posted by Joe Zlomek

POTTSTOWN PA – Unionized employees at [Pottstown Memorial Medical Center](#), who already voted to go on strike next month if they cannot agree with the hospital on terms of a new labor contract, say they'll gather Thursday afternoon (Nov. 19, 2009) for a candlelight vigil in a Pottstown church to heighten public awareness of their cause.

Officials of [Chapter 1199-P of Service Employees International Union](#) claim hospital representatives failed to show up at three of four recently scheduled bargaining sessions. In an effort to create public pressure for action, they sent out a call Tuesday via e-mail for the vigil to be held tomorrow beginning at 4 p.m. in [St. John's United Church of Christ, 11 S. Price St., Pottstown PA.](#)



The event is meant to demonstrate how union members “are taking a stand for our patients, our community, and our future,” the SEIU announcement said. “We believe it is absolutely essential that our employer, [Community Health Systems \(CHS\)](#), come to the table to bargain with us in good faith,” it added.

More than 250 union members are employed by PMMC as licensed practical nurses, nursing assistants, technical professionals, and maintenance and service workers. Their last labor agreement with CHS, a for-profit health care corporation that bought the formerly non-profit hospital in 2003, expired in August (2009). A second and latest contract extension expired last week (Nov. 10, 2009).

At issue in the negotiations, according to the union, are hospital proposals to increase health care insurance premiums, and change a pension fund. The next bargain session between the parties, the union said, are scheduled for Nov. 24 (2009; Tuesday) and Nov. 30 (2009; Monday), both at the Best Western Inn on Industrial Highway in Lower Pottsgrove (PA) Township.

For its part, Tennessee-based CHS has neither acknowledged that bargaining sessions were scheduled or that its representatives failed to meet with the union as planned. In addition, hospital [Chief Executive Officer John Kirby](#) has not made himself available for press interviews on the subject, opting instead to rely on written statements issued by the hospital public relations office.

In response to union members’ Nov. 13 (2009) vote to conduct a three-day work stoppage from Dec. 2-4, hospital spokeswoman Debra Bennis delivered a printed message that said PMMC was “disappointed the union has chosen this tactic, especially while negotiations are continuing.” The hospital would be prepared, she added, “to ensure uninterrupted patient care and the continuation of normal ... operations should a strike occur.”

The continued silence of hospital management seems to have rattled the union.

PMMC figuratively shrugged when SEIU held earlier rallies to decry what it said was a lack of progress in contract talks. Members of the hospital board of directors listened politely but impassively Oct. 26 (2009) when employees descended on a public meeting to seek board support. CHS offered no formal reply when the union said it would file federal unfair labor practice charges against the employer for an alleged failure to bargain in good faith.

The union’s Tuesday e-mail reflected some of its exasperation. In publicizing the vigil, it noted, “Obviously we are on a short time frame here, but we never expected the employer to not show up to the last negotiations.”