

The Berkshire Eagle

NARH strike averted

By Jennifer Huberdeau, New England Newspapers

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NORTH ADAMS -- Picket lines won't be forming outside of North Adams Regional Hospital on Saturday.

The Service Employees International Union 1199, which represents 174 health care workers at the hospital, called off Saturday's strike after reaching a "mutually satisfactory" contract with hospital executives at 9 p.m. Thursday, after 11 hours of negotiations.

"The agreement meets the union's core concerns around guaranteed hours of work and meets the hospitals core concerns around operational flexibility and fiscal needs," Michael O'Brien, local chapter chairman and a respiratory therapist at the hospital said in a statement Thursday night. "The negotiating committee has unanimously recommended the agreement to the general membership. As a result, the strike notice has been rescinded."

One of the major sticking points for the union membership was the hospital's request for a concession granting shift supervisors the right to send employees home during "down time." Other concessions being sought by the hospital included reduced wage increases or no wage increases, reductions in paid time off, expanded responsibilities for certain positions, a freeze on participation in defined benefit pension plans and overtime pay coming only after working more than 40 hours in a week.

Union members will vote to ratify the contract early next week, with details of the agreement being released later today.

Talks between the union and a negotiating team from Northern Berkshire Healthcare, the hospital's parent company, broke down a week ago, with union members filing unfair labor charges against the hospital -- charging executives with regressive bargaining after hospital negotiators supposedly made an offer with substantially lower salaries than previously offered.

Hospital officials had said the concessions would help reduce an ever-increasing operating budget. Northern Berkshire Healthcare faces a \$4 million operating loss and an additional \$4.1 million loss on investments this year.

SEIU also launched a media campaign at the beginning of the week, urging local residents to call Richard Palmisano, NBH president and CEO, directly to voice their opinions about the contract negotiations. On Wednesday, state Rep. Daniel Bosley and state Sen. Benjamin Downing, urged the two sides to return to the negotiating table and reach a settlement.

"The members of SEIU 1199 at North Adams Regional Hospital want to thank the elected leaders and the community at large for their support," O'Brien said. "We want to thank everyone who contacted the hospital, wrote letters to the editor, and who offered their day-to-day support on the streets of North Adams."