



## Nurses to strike at EMMC

By Meg Haskell  
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The nursing union at Eastern Maine Medical Center rejected the hospital negotiating team's final contract offer Sunday afternoon and announced its intention to call a one-day strike. The official strike notice is expected this morning, both sides said Sunday night. By law, the union must give the hospital 10 days to prepare for the walk-out.

The nurses' three-year contract with EMMC was due to expire at midnight on Sunday.

"They've always had the power to stop this at any time," said staff nurse Judy Brown, president of Unit 1 of the Maine State Nurses Association. While negotiations, which have been under way since July, had found common ground on a number of other measures, Brown said the union's top contract priority has always been the creation of a professional practice committee made up of all direct-care staff nurses and without any nursing managers. The committee would be empowered to set nurse-to-patient staffing levels and influence other matters such as the use of technology in delivering patient care or the need for additional support staff such as unit secretaries.

"We're asking for a committee to have more voice and control over our profession," Brown said.

The hospital could not accept the committee as envisioned by the union, said Jill McDonald, vice president for communications at EMMC. Hospital negotiators agreed to most of the union's proposals, McDonald said, including waiving an increase in the amount nurses pay to purchase health insurance for their families and agreeing not to attempt to remove some nurses with supervisory duties from the ranks of the bargaining unit.

"The only thing that's left is control," McDonald said. "And that's their national agenda." EMMC has expressed frustration at the influence of the nationally powerful California Nurses Association, with which the MSNA affiliated last year.

The staffing issue has been on the MSNA's front burner for many years, Brown said, but the Maine organization's recent affiliation with the California organization has offered a "simple and elegant" model for improvement. Professional practice committees have been in effect in

California for two decades, she said, and have worked well to protect patient care while reducing nurses' injuries and other work-related complications.

"This is no secret agenda," she said. "Why reinvent the wheel if California has come up with something that works for them?"

Each floor of the hospital already has a staffing committee with an advisory function, McDonald pointed out. EMMC negotiators offered to establish a single, "housewide" committee with a combination of staff nurses and nurse managers.

But Brown said the staff-nurse-only make-up of the professional practice committee is essential to giving nurses an open forum for airing their concerns about patient safety and other issues. In the past, she said, nurses who have criticized hospital policies have been taken aside individually and "berated, insulted and intimidated" by administrators for not being "team players."

Brown also defended the presence in Maine of chief negotiator Barbara Lambarida of the CNA. The MSNA's own negotiator resigned in July, just days before negotiations were due to begin, she said, and CNA offered Lambarida's services. The Californian's tough bargaining skills were "a fortuitous accident," she said, but contract negotiations reflect the goals and interests of Maine nurses.

EMMC nurses voted last week, prior to the hospital's "last, best offer" made on Sunday, to authorize the union to call a strike if contract negotiations failed. McDonald expressed concern that nurses hadn't been able to vote again after weekend negotiations made the contract more attractive. But Brown said she was confident MSNA members would still support the strike, given the hospital's failure to include the professional practice committee in the final offer.

An eleventh-hour emergency bargaining session with a federal mediator has been scheduled for Tuesday, Oct. 2. But if the stalemate holds, EMMC nurses could strike by the middle of next week.

McDonald said the hospital is prepared to do whatever is necessary to weather the strike. That includes bringing nurses to Bangor from other states, briefing other employees about the situation and "reassuring the community that we were bargaining in good faith, with our patient's best interests, the community's best interests, and Eastern Maine Medical Center's best interests at heart."