

Pomona Valley nurse walkout 'a go' after contract talks stall

Mark Petix, Staff Writer

September 24, 2007

POMONA - Another attempt to reach a contract agreement with Pomona Valley Hospital Medical Center has failed, and nurses expect to begin a five-day walkout Wednesday.

"It is a go," said Sue Weinstein, executive director of the Service Employees International Union, Local 121RN, after union and hospital leaders met with a mediator last week.

But despite the union's agreement to essentially drop free family health care from its contract offer, Weinstein said the hospital would not budge.

"The nurses made some compromises, but the hospital said no," she said.

The union representing 1,000 nurses at Pomona Valley has been negotiating with the hospital since April over issues including health-care benefits and job security.

The hospital recently offered nurses a 5 percent wage increase the first year of the contract and a 4 percent wage hike in years two and three.

Weinstein said the union asked for pay based on years of experience. The hospital rejected the offer.

Negotiations have also stumbled over staffing ratios for some hospital units.

Union leaders say meeting state nurse-to-patient ratios is not enough.

Hospital spokeswoman Kathy Roche said staffing is adjusted based on the needs of patients.

In August, the hospital made an offer union officials said members would not ratify, leading to a one-day strike Sept. 6.

Now the union plans a walkout beginning 7 a.m. Wednesday and ending at 6:59 a.m. Oct. 1. Roche said the hospital will contract nurses from registries to temporarily replace striking nurses during the walkout.

"We are hopeful we can come to a satisfactory resolution, but, at the same time, we are preparing for the possibility of a five-day strike," hospital president Richard E. Yochum said in a statement.

Weinstein expects most of the union's nurses will walk out. She said the hospital fought the creation of the union, which was certified in 2004, so its hard-line approach to contract negotiations is no surprise.

"They appear to be trying to break the union, but it's not going to happen ... " she said. "We are feeling very strong and we are very committed to bring the contract home."