

## Strike time for nurses at Sutter hospitals

By Paul Jones Staff Writer

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Most of the nurses employed by the Novato Community Hospital could walk out today to participate in a two-day strike while replacements take over their duties. According to a local union representative, the hospital had been prepared to strike back with a one-day lockout, before withdrawing the threat early Monday.



SHEILA MASSON/ADVANCE Novato Community Hospital, part of the Sutter Health Affiliate, will be impacted if its 103 union nurses strike today. The Novato hospital has 47 in-beds, an emergency room and out-patient services.

The negotiation theater at the city's largest hospital is a local manifestation of a labor dispute that Sutter Health claims is a union power-grab throughout the Bay Area, and the California Nurses Association says is a response to the hospital network's stalling tactics. But contradictions in both sides' claims indicate it'll take a substantial transfusion of goodwill before progress can be made between them.

According to the nurses union, the main union interests in the widespread strike are patient-to-nurse ratios, Sutter's alleged failure to provide adequate breaks and rapid response teams to deal with medical emergencies, and other working-environment demands. A CNA proposal that Sutter not deduct Social Security benefits from retirement plans, and that retirement medical care be enhanced were also put forward by the union as points of contention.

"I don't know if I can find any Novato-specific issues," said Charles Idleson of the CNC. However, "Sutter is not presenting a desire to resolve or deal with these issues • (it) has a cavalier attitude towards concerns the nurses have raised • a lot of nurses feel they can't take breaks (due to understaffing)."

Idleson said the nurse-to-patient ration was one of the union's dominant concerns. The CNA was a major lobbying group in support of legislation that established the current five-to-one patient-to-nurse ratio.

Idelson also said the strike was partially to protest Sutter Health's community relations policies.

"One egregious example is when they took over the county hospital in Santa Rosa," he said. "They made a commitment • now they've turned around and want to close it."

Janet Urman, a local representative for the CNA, said that the Novato Community Hospital had failed to bargain in good faith with its union employees.

"Not all departments (at NCH) are complying with state ratios," she said. "We want (guarantees) written in. The hospital has refused to provide us with a written commitment assuring us that we will have consistent break and meal relief."

Urman said benefits were also an issue.

"The hospital stalled, delayed and failed to address some proposals, like retirement benefits," she said. "After four months, we have yet to see a written proposal for a contract by the hospital."

However, Sutter representatives said the union had ulterior motives for the strikes.

"They're demanding a master contract, and the other is in the area of concessions to make it easier for the union to enlist new members. They want to create their own rules outside of those provided for in the National Labor Relations Act," said Sutter vice president of communications, Bill Gleason.

Sutter's hospitals currently negotiate separate contracts.

“It seems fairly clear what they're trying to do by issuing all these demands at (our affiliates') bargaining tables,” said Gleason.

“We're a BB in this whole thing,” said Mary Striebeck, community relations for NCH. “The overall union has had an agenda of their own. We've met 12 times (and) they haven't put (a salary and benefits package) before us - we haven't had (stalled negotiations).”

Striebeck said the union's goal was network-wide concessions irregardless of local hospital offers.

“The overall agenda with the union is that they would like to negotiate with Sutter system-wide, (which) the structure doesn't allow,” she said.

“We're a network of locally governed healthcare providers that work together to preserve and enhance not-for-profit healthcare in Northern California,” said Gleason.

However, Gleason said that Sutter's main administration approved local decisions regarding board members and budgets.

Idlson said, “This notion that these hospitals are independent is one of the myths Sutter is perpetuating - Sutter is a big chain.”

Idylson and Urman said that the master contract proposal the union wanted was a secondary issue, and that the union's contention was with Sutter hospitals' contract offers.

“(The master contract) is a smoke screen typical of Sutter,” said Idlson

Idlson also said the union wasn't striking over organizing rights.

“We believe that every registered nurse should have the right to vote whether they want to join a union,” he said. “That's not the main issue of the strike.”

Idlson wouldn't clarify what union interests regarding increased organizing rights were.

Sutter Health is not the only hospital network the strike is directed against, although the network's 13 Bay Area hospitals are the majority facing the Oct. 10 and 11 walkout. The Fremont-Rideout Health Group will also be affected, according to union representatives. California law required a 10-day advance notice before the strike.

Whatever it's outcome, however, both groups said they wanted conditions that would allow for negotiations.

“We hope that we will continue to bargain,” said NCH assistant administrator for patient care services Vicki White. “We've made ourselves available.”

“We have proposed dates, and we haven't gotten responses,” said Urman.

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