

Sutter nurses to consider third strike

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With negotiations stalled, nurses will vote in the next few days on whether to authorize their union to call a third - and perhaps longest - strike against 11 Bay Area hospitals affiliated with Sutter Health.

No date has been set, but a walkout would probably not occur until mid-March or later.

The strike's length also has not been determined. The nearly 5,000 registered nurses represented by the California Nurses Association/ National Nurses Organizing Committee are voting on authorizing a labor action of up to 10 days.

That would be much longer than the two-day strikes held in October and December.

"A 10-day strike is definitely a strong possibility and not a step we would take lightly," said Jan Rodolfo, a registered nurse at Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Oakland.

"But we've been in negotiations now for months and months and the hospitals have failed to respond to our core issues," Rodolfo said.

The dispute centers around health and retirement benefits, meal and break relief, and safe lifting procedures. The union also is seeking contract language to make it easier to organize at Sutter hospitals.

While expressing disappointment, hospital officials said they will take steps to keep their facilities open.

"The last two strikes here it was business as usual," said Jonnie Banks, spokeswoman for Eden Medical Center in Castro Valley.

"We would have a replacement force here that would keep our facility intact and operating hopefully seamlessly," Banks said.

Each hospital now conducts separate negotiations with the union.

Union negotiators have withdrawn their request for a master contract at all hospitals "as a show of good faith," Rodolfo said, yet the hospitals responded by hardening their positions on other issues.

Banks argued that despite the master-contract withdrawal, the union is seeking other language that would expand its organizing rights in an effort to boost its clout and income.

She maintains that is the union's main goal in the talks, but union leaders say their goal is to improve patient safety.

In addition to Alta Bates Summit and Eden, the affected hospitals include Sutter Delta in Antioch, San Leandro Hospital, Mills-Peninsula in Burlingame and San Mateo, and Sutter Solano in Vallejo.

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