

Tension, absurdity on the nurses' strike picket line

• ANTIOCH: Bus full of replacement workers hits protester; stalker brings moment of levity to strikers

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ANTIOCH - The ongoing Sutter Health nurse labor strife teetered on the absurd Saturday as an unknown man, wearing sunglasses, a dark thong, knee-high socks and sneakers, ran through the Sutter Delta Medical Center parking lot, briefly joining the protesters.

The brief moment of levity was followed by tense moments 24 hours later when a bus full of replacement nurses struck a picketer at the same campus, causing a debate over a controversial "10-minute rule."

Nurses at 11 Bay Area hospitals, including the Antioch facility, started a 10-day strike Friday against medical centers affiliated with Sutter Health. The nurses previously held two-day strikes in October and December.

Easter weekend got testy at the Antioch hospital.

On Sunday morning, replacement nurses had just finished a shift and were blocked from exiting the property, according to police. As the bus inched forward attempting to pass a handful of striking nurses, a husband of a nurse was "nicked" by the bus, police, nurse and hospital officials said.

"One of the guys picketing walked directly in front of the bus," Antioch police Sgt. Diane Aguinaga said. The individual was not hurt and no one was arrested, she said.

Aguinaga said a nursing labor representative told the officer that the picketers were blocking the bus during the "10-minute rule," allowing them to block the bus.

"To our knowledge, we are unaware of a 10-minute rule or law that exists giving them the right to block traffic for 10 minutes," said Angela Lombardi, Sutter Delta spokeswoman.

They are allowed to use the crosswalk, but they cannot stop the flow of traffic, she said.

"Putting a human barricade in front of a bus isn't safe," she said.

Sutter Delta registered nurse Amy Black, who has been picketing with her colleagues, said the 10-minute rule is more rule of thumb.

"We are totally within our right to block the bus coming out as long as we're continually moving," she said. "The 10-minute rule is kind of an approximation; usually, it's the standard amount of time.

"We use it to say our chants to the scabs on the bus," she said.

It was not the first replacement nurse bus incident at Sutter Delta. During the two-day walk-out in October, tensions boiled over when a bus with temporary workers arrived and a picketer shined a spotlight in the bus driver's eyes, police said. About 30 strikers then surrounded the bus, preventing it from moving. Police were called and the strikers moved when they were told to do so, Antioch police said at the time.

The incidents have been isolated to the Antioch hospital.

Meanwhile, no one has identified the mystery stalker.

"He was looking for a tan," Lombardi laughed. "Apparently, (the thong) was not flattering."

California Nurses Association spokesman Shum Preston said the stalker was not a nurse but someone who wanted to show support for the picket line.

"It was a moment of levity in a very hostile situation," he said.

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