

✓ HOSPITALS - DOMINICAN Hospital

Strike is averted

Dominican, nurses agree on contract

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SANTA CRUZ — Just three days before nurses at Dominican Hospital were to go on strike, negotiations Saturday morning resulted in a contract after both sides compromised on the key issue of agency shop.

The nurses, who voted to join the California Nurses Association a year ago, had sought a "closed shop," which would require all nurses to join the union in order to work at the hospital.

When hospital officials rejected that demand, the nurses last month proposed agency shop, which would require nurses who did not join the union to contribute \$500, the equivalent of dues, to charity.

The deadlock was broken when hospital negotiators offered to accept agency shop for new nurses while "grandfathering" nurses already on staff — exempting them from making any payment.

"We are very happy this process worked, a strike was avoided and we are looking forward to a good working relationship," Tom Landig, the nurse negotiator, said Saturday. "This has been very emotional for everyone involved, but I think we'll be able to put it in the past and get to the work of caring for patients."

Hospital officials also said they were glad a strike was avoided.

"We're very pleased, and appreciate the spirit of cooperation by nurse negotiators in accepting this

compromise," said Penny Jacobi, hospital spokeswoman.

Jacobi said the compromise is fair to both sides because "... we could protect our long-term nurses while the union got their requirements, also."

Betsy Bowerman, who is eight months pregnant, was attending birthing classes at the hospital Saturday when she heard a settlement was reached.

"I did have some complications with my first pregnancy so (the strike) did give me cause to worry," Bowerman said. "I wasn't as concerned about going through the labor with substitute nurses as I was with the nursery care if the baby had any problems."

Saturday's negotiations followed talks that were called off Friday by a federal mediator who told both sides to reconsider their offers, Jacobi said.

Please see STRIKE — BACK PAGE

Strike averted at Dominican

Continued from Page A1

Landig said discussion was halted because the hospital's negotiator had nothing new to offer until the board of directors met Friday night.

Agency shop was the focal point of the board's three-hour meeting Friday night, said Ralph Bargetto, the board chairman.

"We felt rather strongly that the nurses shouldn't be forced into doing one thing or another, that they should have some choice," Bargetto said. "The board generally felt they wanted to do something for the nurses and for the community. This is what inspired them to make one more concession, and we've made several. No one wanted a strike."

A vote last week showed 71 percent of 344 registered nurses supported a walkout at Dominican, the only emergency care facility in northern Santa Cruz county. This would have occurred at a time when the hospital was at 70 percent capacity, with most beds filled in intensive and coronary care.

Hospital officials said they already had lined up replacement nurses to work during the strike.

The nurses' contract, which will take effect today and expire Oct. 3, 1994, details 46 issues. Among the top items were:

- **Agency shop:** The hospital requested, but did not receive a percentage of union dues for the cost of collecting the money.

- **Pension plan:** Nurses wanted improved benefits included in the contract, but instead will receive additional benefits when they are offered to other hospital employees.

- **Length of contract:** Nurses had sought a multi-year pact, but accepted one that is 16 months.

- **Pay:** Nurses, including those on standby, will get a 13 percent across-the-board pay increase. Nurses who are on call and contracted on a monthly basis will retain their current pay, but not receive health benefits.

- **No strike clause:** Nurses will not strike before their contract expires.

Other items in the contract give the hospital's 438 nurses more input in hospital decisions regarding patient care, Landig said.

"We really did not organize over money or benefits, but over patient-care issues," said Landig. "They'll have a lot more input in how they do their jobs and that will improve patient care."

Nurses will advise hospital administrators on problems like reviewing staffing in the hospital and suggesting how many nurses should work each shift, he said. A nurses' performance committee will oversee this process.

Sigrid Lonnberg, a 14-year Dominican nurse who helped spearhead the union drive three years ago, attended Saturday's final negotiations and said she was "thrilled" with the outcome.

"There's a lot of talent and creativity and knowledge among the nurses and we want to be able to share that with policy-makers at the hospital," Lonnberg said. "It's not going to happen overnight. It's a process, but we've been given the tools with the contract. Because of the unity we've shown, I think we'll be listened to."