

# SOUTH COUNTY

Hospitals - Watsonville Hospital

## Hospital Gets Well Fast

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Nurses picketed at Watsonville Community Hospital during a short but successful strike to gain competitive wages, benefits and ensure quality care at their hospital

Bob Johnson

For nearly six days early this month there was an eerie lack of activity inside Watsonville Community Hospital while outside, on Green Valley Road, a picket line was maintained by nurses who had walked off their jobs in protest. Even before the nurses began their strike shortly after midnight July 9, the hospital ran up a white flag of sorts by packing the dozen most critical patients into ambulances and shipping them off for care at Dominican and Santa Cruz Community hospitals. Once the strike began the hospital refused to admit new patients and as the old patients were released the population dwindled to a handful of patients each in the convalescent wing and the alcoholism recovery program.

Even the nurses themselves had to be amazed at how quickly and decisively they were able to shut down the operation of Watsonville Community. One fact offers testimony to the nurses' indispensability: During the strike the hospital was unable to hire a single registered nurse to replace the 171 who walked.

A decided twist to this one-sided strike is that the nurses were not mainly after higher pay, although they did gain a hefty 18 percent raise over the next three years. And they were also not mainly after improved bene-

fits, although this comes closer to the point as the strike ended the silly irony of a large majority of the nurses being denied medical benefits. More than anything, the nurses' victory in this strike—which could prove to be a victory for the hospital as well—had to do with whether their hospital would be able to provide quality care.

It is traditional for the media to cover strikes as having to do with wages—a tradition that can easily be exploited by publicists for employers of disgruntled but reasonably paid professionals. In the Watsonville nurses strike the two figures bandied about were the pay proposals of the two sides, both well over \$30,000, for full-time registered nurses. These figures, paraded as the core issue, had fairly little to do with the stakes for the 88 percent of the nurses who do not work full-time. It is more accurate to say that registered nurses who have been at Watsonville Community a while will see their pay go up, over the next three years, from \$17.50 an hour to around \$20.65 an hour.

Fairly little attention was paid in most press accounts to the startling fact that before the strike full medical, dental and retirement benefits were received by only 20 of the 171 registered nurses at Watsonville Community. The union originally asked that

benefits be extended to all the nurses working at least 40 percent of the time and gained its most substantial victory in this strike when the hospital agreed to extend coverage to nurses working at least half time.

The contract gains in this strike add up to a fairly-hefty package but many of the nurses could have gotten as much, or more, by going up the street. There were already medical benefits available to half-time nurses at Dominican Hospital, where the administration is careful to not give nurses cause to go union. And the union contract a few miles away at Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital was the model for the settlement at Watsonville Community.

"There's plenty of work around," said one nurse, who was not real concerned about the lost paycheck during the strike. "There's no hardship—in some cases it's a pay raise to go to work next door."

The strongest concern among most of the nurses who shut down Watsonville Community was that many good nurses had already gone next door and many more would do the same in the future unless the hospital offered competitive wages and benefits.

Because there is a statewide shortage of registered nurses, they have considerable freedom to pick and choose among potential employers. As this shortage has grown steadily to around 30,000 nurses, the nurses at Watsonville Community have seen periodic fits of understaffing and regular reliance on registry nurses called in from the outside to fill the gaps.

"I think it's a great hospital but it has changed radically in the last few years," said a second nurse. "In the last month alone we have had three critical-care nurses a shift from agencies. This does not give continuity of care and it's simply not as safe for the patient."

After years of watching other nurses go over the hill to work in Santa Clara County, Watsonville Community Hospital nurses walked out when the problem came even closer to home. With better benefits available at Dominican and a better total package offered at Salinas Valley, a steady deterioration of Watsonville Community's ability to compete for good help looked inevitable. "We don't want people to come to town, interview with other hospitals in the area and go somewhere else," a nurse said. "The central issue in this whole thing is we want the ability to attract good nurses."

This fairly unusual motivation for 171 people to walk off their jobs is in part explained by the nature of the profession that attracts people who care deeply that their job is done well. But there was another, equally personal factor working to encourage the nurses to strike to improve the quality of care at the hospital. "Most of us have been here longer than the administrators," said one nurse. "We live here in the community and we bring our families to this hospital." •