

Nurses walk out

By LISA JAFFE
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Carrying signs reading "Why Not Arbitration?" and "We Care About Health Care," local nurses began picketing Watsonville Community Hospital this morning.

Registered nurses voted overwhelmingly yesterday to strike, and made good on it at 12:02 this morning, when about 20 nurses started walking the line.

The voting, tallied last night, was 120-to-18.

The number of picketers grew early this morning, while the hospital continued to run on a reduced level.

According to Cory Allen, public information officer at the hospital, there were 36 patients in the hospital this morning, some of whom were to be discharged later today.

In addition, the emergency room was still open, and it admitted three car-crash victims this morning.

"There are doctors on duty and we are providing care," she said.

But none of the 13 nurses scheduled for duty today showed up. And only one nurse has indicated a willingness to cross the picket line.

There are currently no new negotiations scheduled, and Allen said it was up to the nurses to make the first move in setting up a meeting.

However, Willard Hatch, chief negotiator for the nurses' union, said that he tried calling Paul Estess, chief executive officer of the hospital, last night to schedule new talks. He claims his call was not taken, and was "shunted off" to an assistant.

Allen denies it, saying that she was with Estess at the hospital, and no call came through.

Regardless of the charges being bandied about by both sides, no one knows when the two sides will meet again, and no one can estimate how long the strike will last.

Hatch's answer was "as long as it takes them to realize the nurses won't crumble."

The hospital's solution is to hire new nurses, and it is currently running an ad to do so. But the nurses on the picket line said such action is useless.

"They won't be able to find any," said Anne Lucero, a member of the nurses' negotiating team. "If there was an overabundance of nurses, we wouldn't be out here."

The nurses say that unless it pays more, the hospital will not be able to attract or keep high-caliber nurses, because of a nationwide shortage of nurses, and the quality of care will suffer.

"Every hospital is trying to hire nurses," Hatch said. "If you look in the want ads, the hourly rates for positions advertised far exceeds those paid here."

Currently, nurses at Watsonville earn between \$14 and \$17.50 an hour, the hospital has said.

The nurses have asked for a two-year contract with an 8 percent salary increase the first year and 5 percent the second. There would also be a benefit increase of between 1 and 2 percent.

The hospital is offering a three-year contract, with a roughly 6 percent per year increase in wages and benefits.

Spirits were high on the picket line this morning. Whole families, pets included, were walking. The coffee never stopped flowing and there was a generous supply of donuts available for the hungry.

But high spirits or no, the pickets were not happy about the situation.

Ellen McGivven, another member of the negotiating team, said that the strike was a "great tragedy."

"We take this very seriously," she said. "It goes against our grain to stop providing care."

Allen said the hospital was also upset it had gone this far.

"The nurses have a right to negotiate and to strike," she said. "The hospital feels strongly about that. But we are sorry it occurred and we are sorry that we can't agree."

Many of the nurses on strike are angry that the hospital turned down the union's offer to submit the issues to binding arbitration, and Hatch said it is an indication that the nurses are not "hearing the whole story."

McGivven said that if the hospital was found by the arbitrator to be in dire straits financially, the nurses would forego a raise. But Allen said the hospital administration was adamant about not letting someone else, who is not familiar with the hospital, decide the fate of the hospital.

"The hospital negotiators have the best and most current information," Allen said.

And the administration also thinks that the nurses do deserve a raise, "but one that is reasonable," she said.

McGivven, however, said, "I think we are more sympathetic to the financial condition of the hospital than they are to our patient-care concerns."

It's a standoff for now. Unless there is a major life-threatening disaster (which the nurses agree would send them back to work, even without a contract), the nurses will be out on the picket line.

One nurse wondered what the Guinness record for a single striker picketing was.

"I've worked 36 hours straight for this hospital when they needed it," she said. "I can walk for 36 hours."

REFERENCE

WATSONVILLE
Register-PAJARONIAN
July 2, 1988



After the nurses went on strike, the hospital covered the words 'basic emergency services' on its sign. Kurt Ellison