

Hospitals - Dominican Nurses Hospital approve contract

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SANTA CRUZ — Back from the brink of a strike, Dominican Hospital nurses overwhelmingly approved their new contract Monday and breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"Everyone was walking around going, 'Aah,'" said Michele Whizin, an emergency room nurse who was on duty Saturday when a compromise with the hospital was reached. "Everyone was much more relieved."

Of the 248 nurses who voted Monday, 245 endorsed the new agreement, said nurse Sigrid Lonnberg.

The 16-month contract will take effect immediately, said Penny Jacobi, Dominican spokeswoman.

"We're happy that now we can start providing health care and not deal with this issue any longer," said Jacobi. "Things already feel much better at the hospital."

A last-minute compromise reached Saturday morning averted plans for roughly 400 nurses to walk out today.

Both sides gave ground on the key issue of agency shop, which will require nurses to either join the California Nurses Association, or pay the equivalent dues to a non-profit agency.

Hospital negotiators, who had fought the proposal, agreed to accept agency shop for new nurses while exempting nurses already on staff from paying dues if they chose not to join the union.

By Monday night, nurses were gathering at Peachwood's Grill in Pasatiempo to celebrate the compromise.

Decked out in party clothes and in jeans, with a folk band on hand to play labor songs, nurses talked about their relief at not having to walk off the job.

"I'm glad they (the hospital negotiators) came their senses," said Holly Hamilton, an emergency room nurse.

"The tension's way down," said Janet Roberts, an intensive care nurse. "We could work, we could smile. ... I think everybody's reasonably happy."