

Nurses approve pact with hospital

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Nurses at Watsonville Community Hospital yesterday overwhelmingly approved the contract settlement hammered out by their representatives and hospital administrators in an 11-hour bargaining session Monday.

The nurses, who are represented by the California Nurses Association, voted 89-to-11 in favor of the settlement, with 100 of the 152 eligible nurses voting.

Both nurses and administrators expressed relief that agreement was reached and a strike averted before the Friday strike deadline.

CNA negotiator Willard

Hatch called the settlement "a win all around," and said it "will lead to a better hospital."

At the center of the two-month contract dispute has been the issue of wage parity with CNA nurses in Santa Clara County.

The new one-year contract gives the nurses a 4 percent salary increase effective July 1, and an additional 4 percent increase in January — considerably less than the nurses had originally proposed, but a big gain over previous hospital offers.

Nurses had originally asked for a 16 percent increase, which they said represented parity with the Santa Clara County nurses. The hospital had

responded with an offer of 2½ percent, which it raised to 4 percent at Friday's meeting.

New salaries for Staff II nurses — the middle-of-the-scale nurses who make up the great majority of the hospital's RNs — will range from \$29,922 to \$36,377 a year after January's increase.

This compares with a range of \$27,664 to \$33,633 in the old contract, which was negotiated 2½ years ago.

Entry-level pay will be \$27,222.

The salaries that will go into effect Jan. 1 are a few percent higher than current Santa Clara County nurses' salaries, but

will most likely fall behind in a couple of months when nurses at those hospitals renegotiate their contracts. (See story on page 11.)

Still to be resolved by a joint committee of nurses and administrators are issues of child care and health-care plans for active and retired nurses. The joint committee has been given 90 days to work out the details.

The new contract includes a number of significant changes from the existing contract. Among them:

- The previous \$100,000 ceiling on the health-insurance pay-out that a nurse can receive over the course of her

life will be increased to \$150,000.

- The hospital can no longer take away benefits it has given nurses unilaterally — outside the formal negotiation process.

- The hospital can no longer eliminate job classifications that would result in demotions with corresponding pay cuts.

- Nurses taking leaves of 30 days or less or at the request of the hospital may not lose their seniority as a consequence.

- The hospital must give notice before firing a nurse who fails to return from a leave of absence.

- Two weeks of paid vacation may be carried over into the following year. (Nurses who have worked at the hospital for two years were previously given three weeks of paid vacation a year, of which they were allowed to carry one into the following year.)

- Newly hired nurses must join the union within 60 days of when they start work. (This replaces the previous deadline of 90 days for full-time and five months for part-time nurses).

- The three CNA representatives among the hospital's nurses will be allowed to participate in the orientation of new nurses.

Both sides came out ahead in the new contract, nurses' rep Hatch concluded.

"We don't have nearly so far to go next time we negotiate," he said, "and the hospital will be better able to hold and recruit nurses."

Hospital spokesman Mark Hucklebridge would only say, "I think there's a sense of relief that a contract agreement has been reached."