

Peninsula nurses begin voting on strike

Stalemate not about salaries, workers say

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SAN MATEO — Some 700 Peninsula nurses began voting Monday on whether to authorize their union to call a strike of up to 10 days at two Peninsula hospitals. The nurses work for the Peninsula Medical Center in Burlingame and Mills Health Center in San Mateo, which are operated by Mills-Peninsula Health Services, an affiliate of Sutter Health.

The local nurses are among 5,000 at 11 Bay Area hospitals operated by Sutter. All the nurses are taking a strike vote that is expected to be completed this week.

A strike could come as soon as the middle of the month for the nurses, who are represented by the California Nurses Association. The union and management have failed to reach an agreement in contract negotiations that began last May. The dispute has already resulted in two strikes, each lasting two days, in October and December.

The nurses say the stalemate is not about salaries, but the issues of patient care, understaffing and their health and retiree benefits. The nurses described a hostile bargaining attitude by Sutter Health, and expect to approve the strike vote.

“I wouldn't term this ‘negotiations,’” said Genel Morgan, a registered nurse at Peninsula Medical Center and a San Mateo resident. “I think the nurses are committed to doing what needs to be done for patients.”

But Mills-Peninsula officials insist that they want to settle the dispute. “We think we have a good offer on the table that is respectful,” said Debbie Goodin, vice president of human resources. “We hope the nurses talk to their union about bringing this to a conclusion.”

The nurses believe they don't have proper staffing to help cover them for meals and other regular breaks, or to help them lift patients. Goodin said the hospitals are hiring for a lift team, but do not want that group to be part of a union contract, because its employees are not nurses.

“The increased benefits and staffing (the nurses want) are too expensive,” Goodin said. Goodin said the hospital is prepared to bring in replacement workers to ensure hospital operations continue if there is a strike.

At least one nurse said Sutter Health has created an atmosphere of intimidation. Sharon Tobin, a registered nurse at the Peninsula Medical Center, said the administration has decided that the nurses' CNA labor representative must be accompanied by security guards when he enters the facility.

Goodin countered by saying the hospital told the union its labor representative has at times disrupted patient care by distributing information to working nurses. It hired more security to make sure that wouldn't happen, Goodin said.

Nurses at Sutter Solano Medical Center in Vallejo voted last week in favor of authorizing a third strike against the Sutter Health facilities. The Peninsula nurses' vote is expected to be completed today.

Other hospitals affected include San Leandro Hospital; Alta Bates Summit medical centers in Berkeley and Oakland; Eden Medical Center in Castro Valley; Sutter Delta Medical Center in Antioch; Sutter Medical Center in Santa Rosa; Sutter Novato; Marin General Hospital in Greenbrae; and St. Luke's Hospital and California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco.

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