

Sutter nurses to vote on 3rd strike

By SANDY KLEFFMAN and ANDREA WOLF/MediaNews Group

The Vallejo Times-Herald

Article Launched: 02/28/2008 07:04:01 AM PST

Sutter Solano Medical Center nurses voted Tuesday night in favor of authorizing their union to call a third strike against 11 Bay Area hospitals affiliated with Sutter Health, union officials said Wednesday.

Nurses within the union at other Bay Area hospitals will vote in the next few days on whether to strike.

Shum Preston of the California Nurses Association/National Nurses Organizing Committee said Sutter Solano nurses voted overwhelmingly in support of the strike.

Preston said Vallejo nurses voted yes because of the "hostile" bargaining attitude by Sutter Health.

As of Wednesday afternoon, the votes had not yet been tallied, Preston said.

Kim Trumbull, director of nursing at Sutter Solano, said many nurses are concerned about Tuesday's vote.

"Several nurses came to me and said they heard the vote was a yes, but they were upset because they had voted no," Trumbull said. "They are upset because they cannot afford to be out for 10 days."

If nurses do strike, Sutter Solano has contracts to bring in nurses from other hospitals so patient care is not affected, Trumbull said.

Trumbull said those employees who were against the strike will most likely be allowed to cross the picket line and come to work.

No date has been set, but a walkout would probably not occur until mid-March or later. The strike's length also has not been determined. The nearly 5,000 registered nurses represented by the California Nurses Association/National Nurses Organizing Committee are voting on authorizing a labor action of up to 10 days.

That would be much longer than the two-day strikes held in October and December.

"A 10-day strike is definitely a strong possibility and not a step we would take lightly," said Jan Rodolfo, a registered nurse at Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Oakland.

"But we've been in negotiations now for months and months and the hospitals have failed to respond to our core issues," Rodolfo said.

The dispute centers around health and retirement benefits, meal and break relief, and safe lifting procedures. The union also is seeking contract language to make it easier to organize at Sutter hospitals.

While expressing disappointment, hospital officials said they will take steps to keep their facilities open.

"The last two strikes here it was business as usual," said Jonnie Banks, spokeswoman for Eden Medical Center in Castro Valley.

"We would have a replacement force here that would keep our facility intact and operating hopefully seamlessly," Banks said.

Each hospital now conducts separate negotiations with the union.

Union negotiators have withdrawn their request for a master contract at all hospitals "as a show of good faith," Rodolfo said, yet the hospitals responded by hardening their positions on other issues.

Banks argued that despite the master-contract withdrawal, the union is seeking other language that would expand its organizing rights in an effort to boost its clout and income.

She maintains that is the union's main goal in the talks, but union leaders say their goal is to improve patient safety.

In addition to Sutter Solano, Alta Bates Summit and Eden, the affected hospitals include Sutter Delta in Antioch, San Leandro Hospital, Mills-Peninsula in Burlingame and San Mateo.