

US: Maine nurses union agrees to demands of hospital administrators

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Earlier this month, the Maine State Nurses Association (MSNA) Unit 1 capitulated to the demands of Eastern Maine Medical Center's (EMMC's) administration. The union officials gave up on the demand for an independent professional practice committee. This committee would allow nurses to decide what staffing levels were necessary to guarantee patient safety.

The strong feelings of the nurses found muted expression in a recent interview in the *Bangor Daily News* with Judy Brown, the union representative. "Nurses are angry that they are not being respected or taken seriously," said Brown. "Nurses have been working a lot of overtime. They're tired. The workload is unmanageable. The quality of care we want to deliver to our patients isn't being delivered."

Eastern Maine Medical Center is a 411-bed comprehensive medical center providing nearly three quarters of the hospital services in the Bangor area and specialty and intensive services to the northern two thirds of the state. One of the largest employers in the state, it employs nearly 300 physicians and 900 nurses. It is part of the Eastern Maine Healthcare System, a corporation that dominates medical services in central, eastern, and northern Maine.

Negotiations for a new three-year contract began in July and have continued on through the fall, even though the previous contract expired on September 30. By the end of September, MSNA Unit 1 (comprising 870 staff nurses at EMMC) had voted in favor of a one-day strike. State law requires that the nurses provide at least one week's notice so that the administrators have time to find replacements. Two thirds of Unit 1 members voted; 92 percent were in favor of the strike.

Union representatives, however, acting against the stated will of the nurses, decided to call off the strike as

a measure of "good faith" in negotiations. The hospital administration met this act of submission with what Brown, the union representative, complained was "a slap in the face"—no concessions were offered.

The union once again voted to strike, the new date set for October 17. A *Bangor Daily News* article dated October 11 stated that the hospital administration referred to the independent nurses committees as "an irresponsible challenge to [the hospital's] bottom line as a business."

The former chairman of the hospital's department of surgery went on to say that allowing nurses any independence regarding their own staffing levels would be "intolerable" for the administration. The hospital administration began preparing for worker action by contracting with U.S Nursing Corporation of Denver, a staffing company specializing in supplying scabs for nursing strikes.

On October 10, the MSNA turned to Democratic Governor John Baldacci. MSNA spokesperson Vanessa Sylvester and Judy Brown of MSNA Unit 1 met with Mike Mahoney, Baldacci's chief counsel, and Labor Commissioner Laura Fortman. Mahoney did not even try to strike a sympathetic pose, saying, "At this point, there is no formal role for the governor's office."

On October 12 and 13, the nurses of EMMC were corralled into another vote. The nurses were given no chance to discuss the contract, and in fact were not even allowed to see it until they arrived on hospital premises to vote. At the prodding of the MSNA, the nurses ratified the contract. The details of the contract were only made public after ratification by EMMC's Board of Trustees the following Monday.

While union leaders attempted to describe the terms as a "building block" for future negotiations, it offers no improvements on the issue of staffing decisions. The

staffing committees that it establishes will be nothing more than another layer of bureaucracy, composed of just as many nurse managers as staff nurses, and will do nothing more than make recommendations to the chief nurse officer, whose final decisions cannot even be appealed.



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