

Olympia, Washington health care workers strike

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Hundreds of health care workers, including admissions staff, lab and sterilization technicians, housekeepers and nurses aides, walked out Monday at Providence St. Peter Hospital in Olympia, Washington, against plans to impose higher health care costs on workers. Remaining on the job are doctors and registered nurses, and the hospital has brought in scabs to cover the striking workers' positions.

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) says RNs and social workers would join the strike if no progress is made in negotiations by Wednesday. The SEIU has limited the strike to five days—reducing it to little more than a protest—though there are currently no plans to return to the bargaining table.

The main issue is health care costs—particularly the hospital's demand to sharply raise deductibles by eliminating the comprehensive Preferred Provider Organization or PPO, a managed care plan that covers approximately 70 percent of the workers.

The three plans on offer include a high-deductible Health Savings Account (HSA), which more than quadruples the initial out-of-pocket expenses. Like many HSAs, the plan only meets the bare minimum of included basic care such as yearly checkups. The other two plans would also produce a significant rise in workers' costs.

The labor agreement expired at the turn of the year. Though negotiations had been ongoing since May 2012, no new deal has been reached. The hospital imposed the new health coverage programs unilaterally on January 1.

Providence St. Peter is the second-largest employer in Olympia, and though a non-profit, had revenues of more than \$8.7 billion in Fiscal Year 2011, according to its financial statement. The average income for striking workers is \$31,000 per year. Under the current

plans, workers must pay approximately 10 percent of their income for health care.

While there is widespread anger among workers, the SEIU has called the limited strike to let off steam, while seeking a settlement with the hospital that will inevitably include major concessions.

The SEIU insistence that the strike will not go past Saturday at 9:59 a.m. has allowed the hospital to schedule replacement workers and bring in workers from temp agencies and other branches of Providence. The SEIU has not said what it will do if the hospital refuses to return to negotiations.



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