

California nurses strike at San Bernardino Hospitals

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Hundreds of nurses in California's San Bernardino County manned picket lines Tuesday, in a two-day strike against low wages and poor working conditions. In advance of the action, Arrowhead Regional Medical Center (ARMC), the county hospital, declared a "state of emergency," moving as many patients out of the facility as possible the weekend before the action.

The 1,200 nurses in San Bernardino County, represented by the California Nurses Association (CNA) and National Nurses United (NNU), voted to authorize the strike for December 9 and 10 over negotiations that began in February over a contract that expired last March. The negotiations have centered on the issue of unsafe working conditions, with many nurses being overwhelmed with the sheer number of patients they have to care for. Issues of pay raise and high turnover rates were also at stake.

At least 900 employees work at the Arrowhead Regional Medical Center, with 330 other health care workers in the county jails, juvenile halls, community clinics, and other facilities.

Nurses described low wages and conditions at ARMC as contributing to a situation where an increasing percentage of nurses are inadequately experienced, eroding the quality of patient care. An ARMC nurse since 2006, Michelle Perry, told the press that, on some shifts, "new grads are training new grads."

San Bernardino County officials publicly accuse nurses of "abandoning their patients" and "costing taxpayers millions of dollars."

In a courtroom hearing, Tim Yeung, who is representing the county in negotiations, said the county was in "dire straits" because registry nurses were not going to cross the picket line and a major strike replacement company would not have its staff out in time this week.

San Bernardino County Judge Pamela King issued a temporary restraining order against some 60 nurses deemed as "critical" from participating in the job action, only to be allowed at picket lines during non-working hours. This number was substantially less than what the county was originally seeking.

Hospital management reduced the number of patients to over 200, transferring 20 to other hospitals and discharging 66. The county government also spent \$4 million hiring staff and nurses to replace nurses on strike.

Union officials said the disparity in wages is at least 30 percent in what registered nurses make in county hospitals and private hospitals. For some of the most experienced registered nurses the wage gap is 52 percent. All this has contributed to a drain of nurses who leave the county to find better pay elsewhere.

The loss of experienced nurses and an increasing number of patients per nurse has led to an intensification of stress on workers and patients while it puts the latter in danger of neglect or worse. According to the CNA, 90 percent of current surgical ICU staff is new as well as 16 new registered nurses in Labor and Delivery.

Rhonda Watts, an ICU RN with 27 years' experience at Arrowhead Regional Medical Center (ARMC), said in a statement, "If the county continues on the present course, more and more experienced RNs will feel no choice but to leave ARMC and conditions here will erode further. We want the County to stop squandering money on temporary labor and invest instead in retaining and recruiting (a) seasoned competent nursing staff that will provide our patients with the quality care they deserve."

Genuine patients' protection necessitates first and foremost a highly skilled and properly compensated

personnel working in a safe environment.

Even though the nurses' struggle is determined and is winning the support of medical professionals and workers in other areas, they have been compelled to conduct this fight with their hands tied. While hospital management has systematically used the economy as an excuse to cut costs by driving down wages and conditions, the process of negotiations has been rendered futile for the nurses. The unions representing them, the CNA/NNU, rather than leading a serious struggle, have only organized a publicity stunt.

That is why the strike was only limited to two days, designed to have the most minimal impact on the operations of the hospital and only limited to San Bernardino County. The strike is aimed at providing a chance for workers to blow off steam before returning to work in unsafe conditions.

The CNA has made sure to collaborate with hospital corporations at every step of the way, providing a Patient Protection Task Force to cross the picket line in case of a medical emergency, and discouraging registry nurses from filling in for striking nurses, as well as giving the county 12 days' notice before any strike. For the union bureaucracy, the strike has been effectively transformed into a tool to secure concessions and a dues-paying base from the nurses.



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