

Daily Labor Report, March 4, 2011

Health Care Employees
RNs Conduct One-Day Strike Despite Plan
By Washington Hospital for Five-Day Lockout

As threatened, registered nurses represented by National Nurses United at the Washington Hospital Center, the largest hospital in Washington, D.C., at 7 a.m. March 4 began a 24-hour strike.

The nurses, however, will not be allowed to return to their jobs until 7 a.m. on March 9. The hospital center has contracted with a professional nurse agency to provide temporary replacement nurses, and has committed to give those nurses 60 hours of work, consisting of five 12-hour shifts, according to hospital spokeswoman So Young Pak.

According to the union, the nurses will continue to picket outside the hospital for the entirety of the lockout.

Pak told BNA March 4 that nearly two-thirds of the nurses scheduled to work the day shift reported to work. She added that the impact on the hospital's operations "was minimal," with all services and clinics open.

A major issue in dispute, according to NNU, is what the nurses call the refusal of the hospital to address "serious concerns" about safe staffing and other patient care issues.

Another contentious issue during bargaining has been the hospital's proposal to change the way nurses are compensated for working evening, night, and weekend shifts, moving from a percentage of base salary to a flat dollar amount. NNU has contended that many nurses would lose substantial amounts of income with the change in the way the differentials would be calculated.

According to a Feb. 26 statement from the hospital center, despite the union's "public rhetoric about alleged concerns around safety and staffing, none of these issues was raised or discussed by the union in any way in the most recent negotiating sessions. In fact, staffing, which is robust at Washington Hospital Center, has not been an area of dispute between the parties in any of the federally supervised sessions. While we understand these are topics NNU feels will get the most play in the media, these topics were absent from the union's agenda during the discussions held during the last several months."

In addition, the hospital center contended that its shift differentials are "above the market value and will remain so under our proposals."

Prior Contract Expired Last April

Some 1,650 nurses have been without a contract since an agreement between WHC and the independent Nurses United of the National Capital expired last April. In October,

after WHC implemented portions of its final contract offer, members of the independent union voted to affiliate with NNU (194 DLR A-1, 10/7/10), but the hospital center failed to recognize and bargain with the national union. More than a month later, after NNU notified WHC that its members planned to walk out for 24 hours beginning at 7 a.m. Nov. 24, the hospital center agreed Nov. 17 to recognize and bargain with NNU (222 DLR A-10, 11/18/10).

Negotiations between the hospital center and NNU began in early December, but in mid-February members of the union voted to authorize their bargaining committee to call a 24-hour strike, contending there had not been “significant progress” since negotiations resumed, with key issues still outstanding (32 DLR A-9, 2/16/11).

Support From Other Unions, Public Officials

Meanwhile, the nurses are receiving support from the rest of the labor movement, as well as elected officials.

A March 4 lunchtime rally, headlined by AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, drew close to 2,000 people including members of other unions and community supporters, NNU said in a statement.

Trumka told the nurses at the rally that the federation is prepared to “stand shoulder to shoulder with you, whatever you need.” He praised the RNs for “standing up and standing together like our brothers and sisters in Madison and Cleveland and Indianapolis and a hundred other cities across America.”

The nurses also heard from one of the co-presidents of the national NNU, who said that all of the union's 160,000 nurses across the country are standing with them.

Earlier, 10 City Council members and D.C. Mayor Vincent Gray (D) separately urged Medstar, which owns WHC, to resolve the dispute prior to the strike.

By Michelle Amber