

Kick off comes without fanfare

A half-dozen Sutter nurses picket on first of 10-day walkout

By RACHEL RASKIN-ZRIHEN/Times-Herald staff writer

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Sutter Solano Medical Center's longest nurses strike in more than a decade kicked off with little fanfare Friday.

In what's beginning to be a familiar sight at Vallejo's Hospital Drive and Tuolumne Street, a half-dozen nurses who had exchanged their scrubs for jeans and sweats, waved picket signs. The red-and-white banners sported slogans like "Patients before Profits" and "Nurse on Strike for Patient Care" in English and Tagalog.

Motorists driving by honked in solidarity with the striking nurses, and at least one stuck a clenched fist out his window in salute.

Some 4,000 registered nurses from California Nurses Association began striking at 7 a.m. Friday at eight Sutter facilities to show Sutter Health they are serious about negotiating a new contract. This is the third nurses strike at northern California Sutter-affiliated hospitals in less than six months. The other walkouts lasted only two or three days, though striking nurses at some hospitals, including Sutter Solano, had to stay off work several days past the strikes' official end. Nurses union officials called this a lockout, though hospital officials blamed it on minimum contracts with replacement nurse agencies.

On the first day of what is scheduled to be a 10-day strike, Sutter Solano on Friday had about twice the usual number of nurses on duty, with replacement nurses and several dozen regular RNs who crossed the picket line, said Kim Trumbull, the hospital's chief nurse executive.

"It's going fabulous," Trumbull said. "We are completely overstaffed. We had a total of 72 of our nurses sign up this morning to work over the 10 days, and with the 70 replacements we hired, we have several departments with twice as many nurses as required."

Sutter Solano spokesman Russell Neilson said there was an "unprecedented" 49 percent crossover.

Nurses on the picket line Friday disputed the number of union members who reported for work despite the strike.

"Only about four or five crossed the picket line," said Marilou Blaze, a Sutter Solano RN who was manning the picket line Friday.

Nurses union officials say the key reason for the walkout is a "pattern of patient safety risks caused by Sutter's refusal to schedule RNs to care for patients when nurses are on legally mandated meal or rest breaks," according to the California Nurses Association Web site.

"There are times when you just can't take a break, because there is no one to monitor the patients," Blaze said.



Cora De Jesus, with 21 years of experience in nursing, all at Sutter Solano Medical Center in Vallejo, joins the picket line Friday morning as nurses at the facility start a 10-day strike. (Mike Jory/Times-Herald)

"There are mandated nurse-to-patient ratios that are the law, and why Sutter doesn't want to abide by the law, I just don't know," said nurse union leader emeritus Kay McVay.

By the numbers:

8 - Sutter facilities with nurses participating in the strike.

49 - Percent of nurses crossing the picket line, according to Sutter Solano.

4,000 - Nurses estimated to be striking across Bay Area.

Nurses' health care and pensions are also issues, union officials say.

"Some of us have worked here 30, 35 years, and our retirement package isn't even comparable to other hospitals near here," said Sutter RN Solita Locso of Vallejo.

Sutter officials say these claims are "misleading."

The union's "real motivation" is to gain "more members and more dues money," Sutter officials have said. The truth, they claim, is that Sutter hospitals' proposals meet and exceed what the union has already agreed to with other hospitals in the categories of staffing, health care and retirement benefits.

"The union is demanding that we agree to language that would make it easier for them to increase membership and collect a \$4 million windfall in new dues and money each year - for a total of \$11 million from Sutter hospitals," according to the health care giant's Web site.

For CNA information, visit www.calnurses.org. For information of Sutter's negotiations with CNA, go to the news link on suttersolano.org, and click the link to Sutter Health Hospitals Negotiating with CNA.

- E-mail Rachel Raskin-Zrihen at RachelZ@thnewsnet.com or call 553-6824.