

St. Louise employees hint at strike

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GILROY - Scores of Saint Louise Regional Hospital workers are donning purple and gold pins atop their scrubs these days.

The pins, which read "July 1," are not-so-subtle reminders that more than 160 hospital workers could be on strike sometime after that date, if their contracts are not changed in their favor.

Clerical staff, housekeepers, food service workers, nursing assistants and lab technicians have been working without contracts since theirs expired at the end of April.

They want to sign a four-year deal that would, among other things, promise them health benefits when they retire and set up a special fund workers could tap to further their medical education.

A spokesperson from the hospital did not return phone calls before press time.

"July 1 is not a strike date as much as it is a goal to hopefully have a new contract," said Rick Villegas, a Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) lab technician at Saint Louise. "If everyone is bargaining in good faith, then we might take another extension if necessary."

The workers and the hospital have met twice already but to little avail. A third bargaining meeting is slated for Tuesday between hospital administrators and union representatives.

According to Villegas, the workers would give the hospital 10 days notice if they were to go on strike, allowing for some temporary help to be hired. Also, before a strike is called, the workers would picket the hospital.

"We call it an informational picket line," Villegas said.

The potential strike does not involve Saint Louise's registered nurses since they are represented by a separate union. Doctors and administrators do not have a union at Saint Louise.

The "July 1" pins are not only being worn by Saint Louise staffers. Workers at all six Daughters of Charity hospitals in California also are pinning themselves.

"It's an expression of our desire to have a contract by July 1," union vice president John Borsos said regarding the pin. "It's not a scare tactic."

Borsos, who is a field representative for the local branch of the Service Employees International Union, described the negotiations as being in a very early stage.

"It's incredibly premature to be talking about a work stoppage at this point," Borsos said. "We're in negotiations, and we're waiting for our proposals to be responded to. The last thing healthcare givers ever want to do is strike."

However, Borsos said Daughters of Charity - the owner and operator of Saint Louise - is complicating the process by negotiating separately with each of its hospitals. Borsos said the company could save time and money by negotiating collectively.

Also, hospital workers did resort to striking in 2002 when the existing contract was being negotiated. That strike only lasted a day before an agreement was reached, Villegas said.

According to Villegas and Borsos, there is a high turnover rate for hospital workers such as lab technicians, nursing assistants and the other types of employees who are negotiating their contract.

Throughout California, the turnover rate is 20 percent. Villegas and Borsos say the lack of retiree benefits and the inability to further one's education are crucial factors.

That's why those are two sticking points during these negotiations.

For instance, if hospitals pool together funds and earmark them for training, nursing assistants could use the money to take nursing courses and potentially work their way up to being registered nurses.

Also, if health insurance coverage is given to retirees, workers would have more incentive to stick with their profession.

"We want to make these jobs ones that people come into and try to make a career out of," Borsos said.

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