

Berkshire Medical Center physicians ask nurses to stay on job

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By Berkshire Eagle Staff

PITTSFIELD — Berkshire Medical Center's medical staff leadership on Thursday formally urged the hospital's unionized registered nurses not to vote to authorize a strike.

The message was delivered in a letter signed by the 18 physicians who comprise the hospital's Medical Executive Committee and who represent its medical staff. The letter was distributed at BMC Thursday afternoon, hospital spokesman Michael Leary said.

"We encourage members of the MNA to seriously consider the consequences of a strike vote and vote 'no,'" the letter stated.

"We assume, based on the experiences at other hospitals in Massachusetts, that if a strike vote passed locally, a strike by the MNA unit at Berkshire Medical Center is a certainty. We hope that this can be avoided," the letter continued.

The letter was issued the same day a one-day strike by about 1,200 nurses at Tufts Medical Center in Boston turned into a lockout that will last until Monday.

Of the roughly 800 RNs at BMC who are represented by the MNA, or Massachusetts Nurses Association, 616 are voting members. If the unionized nurses at BMC vote to authorize a strike, local union leadership could launch a strike with 10 days' notice if negotiations do not yield sufficient results.

If a strike takes place, the hospital would bring in replacement nurses, according to hospital officials.

What constitutes adequate nursing staffing is a main issue of contention between the local MNA bargaining unit and BMC. Both sides have been in contract negotiations since September.

On May 31, the nurses rejected the hospital's final contract offer.

The hospital's final offer stands as this: A 1 percent increase retroactive to last year with a 2 percent bonus for nurses at the top of the scale on their anniversary dates, then 1 percent increases in 2017 and 2 percent increases in 2018, with bonuses of 2 percent to nurses at the top of the scale in both years.

According to the union, that offer was rejected by 405, or 82 percent, of the 495 members who voted.

The union has been seeking a 3.5 percent increase in a one-year contract, 1.5 percent retroactive to when talks began in September.

If the strike authorization is approved in late July, the action would take place in early August at the soonest.

MNA spokesman Joe Markman said the medical staff at the hospital should be more concerned with nurse staffing levels and how that affects the quality of care than with nurses standing up for themselves and their patients.

"Nurses [at BMC] have been talking to hospital staff and officials about staffing levels for years and it still hasn't been resolved," Markman said. "It's understandable that their colleagues are concerned [about a possible strike], but they should be more concerned about the working conditions for the nurses and the quality of patient care."

"We've been concerned about the negotiations for quite some time and see the direction things are going," Daniel Doyle, the chief of BMC's medical staff, told The Eagle on Thursday.

At its last meeting, the Medical Executive Committee "decided to take a position in case the nurses should strike and to take care of patients to the best of our ability," Doyle said. "We will take every measure to make sure patient safety isn't compromised."

In its letter, the Medical Executive Committee said that should the local MNA bargaining unit go on strike "we, the medical staff, will continue to make every effort to provide the quality of care that our community has come to expect both from its hospital and from its medical community."

The letter concluded, "We are also confident that the other 3,300 of the 4,100 employees at Berkshire Medical Center share our view and our commitment to continuing patient care regardless of what actions the MNA may take locally."