

Our Opinion: Strike by BMC nurses will worsen dispute

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The increasing turmoil at Tufts Medical Center in Boston following a one-day nurses' strike last week provides a cautionary tale as registered nurses at Berkshire Medical Center (BMC) move closer to a potential strike vote this month.

In a letter released Thursday, the 18 members of the center's medical staff leadership urged the RNs to "seriously consider the consequences of strike vote and vote no." (Eagle, July 14.) Those consequences, of course, will be shared by the community if the result is that the gap between nurses and management over the nurses' contract grows larger.

At Tufts, the one-day strike of nurses was followed by a lockout of the nurses by Tufts management that will last through the weekend while replacement nurses tend to patients. Tufts CEO Dr. Michael Wagner told The Boston Globe that the hospital was standing up to the "intimidation, harassment and bullying" of the Massachusetts Nurses Association, while the MNA replied that it was Tufts management that was bullying the nurses. Whatever the intent of the strike it is clear that it did not help facilitate a settlement.

Like their counterparts at Tufts, the registered nurses at BMC, who are also represented by the MNA, are at odds with management over salaries and staffing. On May 31, the nurses decisively rejected what Berkshire Health Systems (BHS) said was its final contract offer. Nurses are seeking a 3.5 percent pay increase in a one-year contract with a 1.5 percent increase retroactive to last September when negotiations began. Management offers a 1 percent increase retroactive to last year, a 1 percent increase in 2017, a 2 percent hike in 2018 and bonuses of 2 percent for nurses at the top of the scale. The nurses are adamant that insufficient staff is putting a strain on them and poses a risk to patients, while BHS counters that it added 60 nurses following the closing of North Adams Regional Hospital and its staffing meets the guidelines of the American Nursing Association.

The salary proposals are close enough that a compromise should be reachable. The staffing dispute is more philosophical in nature and tougher to resolve, with the nurses seeking assurances of optimum working conditions while management wants flexibility in staffing. Both sides have legitimate concerns, and bringing in an arbiter to find a middle ground offers a potential solution. It does not appear that management and the nurses and their union are so far apart that there is a need to head to the battlements.

The specifics of this contract dispute aside, the administration and the registered nurses are equally concerned for what is best for the hospital and its patients. Anyone in Berkshire County who has been — or will be, at some point — a patient at BMC shares that concern. As a major employer, BHS is also an economic engine for Pittsfield, the hub of the Berkshires. A great deal is at stake, and the one-day strike at Tufts and the response to that strike have at this point succeeded only in hardening the two sides in their positions and increasing the animosity between them.

We urge the nurses to abandon their strike vote and we encourage both parties to return to the negotiating table with renewed vigor. If talks continue to stall, an independent third party could be introduced.

A one-day strike of RNs at BMC will cause management to hire replacement nurses demanding a minimum number of days, making it impossible to have a brief, symbolic strike. Tensions will escalate and the healing that will have to follow a resolution of this dispute will be delayed. Rather than follow the example at Tufts, let's learn from it instead.