

Berkshire Medical Center nurses authorize strike; talks to resume next week

Posted Wednesday, July 26, 2017 10:09 pm

By Larry Parnass, lparnass@berkshireeagle.com

PITTSFIELD — Registered nurses at Berkshire Medical Center are giving their leaders a green light to call a one-day strike at the Pittsfield hospital if they deem it necessary, after nearly a year of contract talks.

The vote counted Wednesday night was 442 in favor and 92 against a possible strike, the union reported after balloting ended at 8 p.m.

The vote does not guarantee a strike will occur.

But union members celebrated Wednesday as they saw the stack of "yes" ballots grow higher and higher, according to Amber Van Bramer, a critical care nurse who is a member of the bargaining committee.

"People are really happy that we're able to come together," Van Bramer said after she led a count, then watched another group confirm the tally. "Even though it is a very stressful situation."

In all, 85 percent of eligible members voted, said Joe Markman, a union spokesman. Of the roughly 800 RNs at the hospital represented by the union, 616 are voting members.

The hospital has said it is prepared to ensure continued operations by bringing in replacement nurses to cover shifts, all of them licensed to practice in Massachusetts.

Under federal law, health care unions must provide at least a 10-day notice of a plan to strike.

Michael Leary, a hospital spokesman, said officials hope progress toward an agreement can be made during the next two bargaining sessions. They are set for Tuesday and Aug. 7, according to the union.

"We are naturally disappointed that the MNA has taken this action," Leary said in a statement responding to a request for comment. "But the results are not surprising given the union's record across Massachusetts in taking hospitals out on strike to support their statewide political agenda."

If a strike is called by the local's 16-member bargaining committee, it would continue a year of boisterous activism for the Massachusetts Nurses Association and its members.

The union led strikes at Baystate Franklin Medical Center in Greenfield in June and again this month at Tufts Medical Center in Boston. Across the state, members of the union have been pressing for pay increases and for hiring to improve nurse staffing levels.

If replacement workers are needed, the hospital plans to keep them working for five days. That is the minimum number of days allowed by the agency supplying the nurses, Diane P. Kelly, the hospital's chief operating officer, told The Eagle earlier this month.

In the case of the Tufts strike, nurses planned to strike for one day, but were locked out by the hospital because its staffing replacement agency required the replacement RNs to work at least three

days.

"In the event of a strike, Berkshire Medical Center is fully prepared to provide all services, procedures and programs, uninterrupted," Leary said in the statement Wednesday night.

The voting on a strike authorization was held on two days this month to accommodate members taking summer vacations. The first day of voting took place July 17.

The outcome confirms views expressed late this spring, when members of the union, after rejecting what the hospital termed its "best and final offer," indicated they were prepared to hit the picket lines.

That offer by the hospital at the end of May included 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.

On the other side, 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.

The vote counted Wednesday closely tracked what nurses indicated when they rejected the offer in May. In that vote by the eligible membership, 82 percent rejected the offer, one percentage point under the result tabulated Wednesday.

"I think this will help motivate them," Van Bramer said, referring to the strike authorization and the hospital negotiating team. She said she didn't believe registered nurses at Berkshire Medical were influenced by the other two strikes.

"We all know what we need," she said in an interview.

Hospital officials have said they are constrained by health care economics and dispute that current staffing is unsafe in any way. More information about Berkshire Medical Center's handling of negotiations is available at bmcnurses.com, a website maintained by the hospital.

The two sides last held a bargaining session July 20, when the union says it revised its proposal on staffing levels.

Markman and Van Bramer said the hospital asked for time to consider the union's new position, but had not responded as of Wednesday.

When negotiations resume Tuesday, the two sides will again meet across a big table at an undisclosed Berkshires location. All members of the union's bargaining committee — themselves elected by the membership — take part in the talks, joined by a negotiator who is a staff member of the MNA.

On the other side, the hospital is represented by a bargaining team of upwards of a half-dozen people, Markman said.

A federal mediator is also involved.

If a strike is actually called, that decision will be made by the local bargaining unit, Markman said. "Those nurses will decide together," he said.

Reach staff writer Larry Parnass at 413-496-6214 or @larryparnass