

ACCOUNTABILITY

Why health care workers are picketing Wednesday at Sutter psychiatric hospital in Sacramento

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Roughly 150 health care workers will rally and picket Wednesday outside the Sutter Center for Psychiatry in Sacramento, protesting wages and staffing levels at the hospital run by Sutter Health.

In October 2021, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the workers voted to join the National Union of Healthcare Workers, but they have yet to ink a contract with their employer. Union members told The Sacramento Bee that the company has withheld pay raises since they joined the union and has been understaffing their facility for years.

“We are disappointed that the union is choosing to picket, especially as we have continually bargained in good faith and have reached tentative agreements on a number of contract items,” Sutter leadership wrote in a statement to The Bee.

Elk Grove resident Wesley Moore Jr., a patient care support specialist, said he feels the pandemic played a critical role in why he and other employees at the psychiatric hospital voted for the union and have continued to support collective bargaining even as Sutter management has sat on raises for NUHW members that other workers at the facility received.

“COVID definitely ... brought everything to a boil. It was a powder keg,” Moore said. “None of us were getting any sort of compensation while we were being exposed to COVID directly.”

Moore said the issues at work spilled over into his personal life. “

My wife was pregnant at the time, and there were times I couldn't come home or I was sleeping in the garage because I didn't want to be around her because I knew I had been exposed to COVID,” Moore continued.”

Even before the pandemic, workers now represented by NUHW were frustrated that they didn't have enough staff to ensure the safety of both the workers and the patients, said Moore, whose job entails assuring that adolescents in the facility are safe throughout their stay.

Frustrations mount over wages, leading to complaint

Since workers joined the NUHW, Moore said, Sutter has not given him or his colleagues the merit-based wage increases and cost-of-living adjustments it typically distributes each year.

Per federal regulations, once employees vote to join a union, company management must maintain the status quo and past practices until bargaining of the first contract is complete, NUHW officials said in a statement to The Bee.

“The past practice was that, each summer, Sutter would give employees a raise,” the NUHW statement noted. “The amount of the raise each year and for each individual is different, based on each employee's annual performance review. In summer 2022, they gave raises to non-union employees, but withheld them from our members.”

The union filed a complaint about the raises with the National Labor Relations Board, alleging unfair labor practices, and the board found the charge had merit, the union officials said. Only after that did Sutter agree to make employees whole, but so far, they have paid only the merit increases.

Consequently, NUHW said, it filed another complaint with the NLRB to get the last two cost-of-living adjustments that members have been denied.

NUHW President: ‘Sutter Health is an anti-union employer’

“Sutter Health is an anti-union employer that's trying to punish workers for forming a union in hopes that other Sutter workers won't do the same,” said NUHW President Sal Rosselli. “By wasting so much time that should have been spent working together to improve the care at its psychiatric hospital, Sutter is doing real harm to patients, workers and its own reputation.”

Sutter officials said they remain focused on reaching a final contract and continuing to provide safe, compassionate patient care.

“We greatly value the quality care and support our employees provide patients,” company officials said in their statement. “In turn, we provide team members competitive pay and benefits, as well as resources and opportunities to grow and develop their careers.”

Union members will be picketing from 6-8:30 a.m. and from 2-4 p.m. at 7700 Folsom Blvd., NUHW officials said, and a number of local politicians and political candidates plan to join them on the picket line and at rallies. Expected visitors include Sacramento City Council members Karina Talamantes, Katie Valenzuela and Mai Vang and California Assembly candidates Paula Villescaz and Sean Frame.

The union noted that Sutter Center for Psychiatry contracts with Sacramento County to provide care for adults and children with serious mental health conditions. Medi-Cal recipients, NUHW officials said, account for 57% of patients admitted to the hospital.

The NUHW membership at the Sutter hospital includes mental health therapists, social workers and licensed vocational nurses. While on the picket line Wednesday, they also will be casting votes on whether to authorize a strike.