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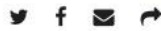
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ACCOUNTABILITY

Health care workers to picket Sutter psychiatric hospital. Here's why, and what the company says

BY CATHIE ANDERSON
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Mental health hospital workers say Sutter Health is withholding raises, stalling contract negotiations to deter workers from joining a union. Nov. 8, 2023 BY CATHIE ANDERSON

Dozens of health care workers mounted a one-day strike at the Sutter Center for Psychiatry in Sacramento on Wednesday, even though the company said it would bar some of them from returning to work on Thursday and Friday.

About 150 workers at the psychiatric hospital voted two years ago to form a union local affiliated with the National Union of Healthcare Workers, but they have yet to negotiate their first contract with Sutter Health.

Workers told The Sacramento Bee that they are pushing for better pay and for measures to improve patient care, saying the changes will improve Sutter's ability to hire and retain workers at the 73-bed facility on Folsom Boulevard.

Employees say the company has been punishing them for exercising their right to organize. The NUHW local has filed complaints with the National Labor Relations Board over raises that they say were withheld and over Sutter's bargaining tactics.

"We really care about our patients, and we want to make sure they get the care they need to get better," said Cesar Mardones, a licensed clinical social worker at the hospital. "It seems like Sutter only cares about money, even if it means losing good caregivers and failing its own patients."

In a statement, Sutter Health officials said they value the quality care and support their team members provide to patients, and the company provides competitive wages, benefits and opportunities for them to grow and develop their careers.

"We are disappointed that the union is choosing to strike, especially as we continue to bargain in good faith and have reached agreements on multiple topics," the statement read. "As a show of our commitment to reach an agreement, we have offered to work with a neutral federal mediator, but unfortunately, that was rejected by union representatives."

The NUHW-represented workers said they want the company to make changes that will attract and retain employees.

Union goes to feds to get raises

In a union survey, about four out of five respondents reported that they experienced understaffing at least once a week, and 58% reported witnessing unsafe situations at work because staffing wasn't adequate.

Elk Grove resident Wesley Moore Jr., a patient care support specialist, said that in 2022 and 2023, Sutter withheld merit-based pay increases and cost-of-living adjustments from NUHW members that it had given to other employees.

The company only began paying after the union filed complaints over unfair labor practices and the NLRB ruled in favor of the union, Moore said. Still, union officials said, workers are waiting to receive their cost-of-living increases.

Despite the NLRB ruling, Sutter said it disputes the union's contention that it committed unfair labor practices.

Union officials said they filed another complaint with the NLRB after Sutter's negotiating team proposed keeping the status quo on current health benefits and later put an offer on the table that would increase co-pays for the NUHW-represented workers.

Going backward in negotiations in this way can give the other side the feeling that they're running out of time to get an agreement, said John August, a labor expert at Cornell University who advises both labor and management negotiators trying to reach agreements.

"This lack of progress or backwards progress can be seen as a deliberate attempt to delay bargaining in the hopes that union members would get discouraged and maybe no longer support the union," August said. "It's a little bit harder to prove because it can be subjective, but if it can be shown that that's what the ... employer's intent was, a bad-faith bargaining charge is certainly possible."

A 'war of tactics'

While most of the striking NUHW members will be allowed to return to work on Thursday, union officials say Sutter plans to lock out Moore and other patient care support specialists for two days after the strike. NUHW also represents therapists, social workers and dietary workers at the hospital.

In response to a Bee query about the lockout of patient care support specialists, Sutter said the action "is in no way related to our feelings regarding (patient care support specialists) staff, our value of them or the importance we place in this role."

The company did not have internal personnel to staff those positions, as it did with the other personnel, Sutter spokesperson Angeline Sheets said, and it had to sign contracts with an external staffing service. That contractor required the assurance of three days of work. Consequently, those patient care team members will not be able to return to work until 7 a.m. Saturday.

August said that, while this practice of locking out workers for additional days is not uncommon, there are plenty of organizations in the health care industry that bring their workers back into work as soon as possible.

"There's a better relationship between labor and management, and they don't want to overly injure that relationship," he said. "If there's a decision made not to do that, it tells me that the relationship there between labor and management is extremely acrimonious. This is part of the war that goes on. It's a war of tactics."