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Cleaning and Healthcare Workers Protest and Demand Better Wages

For a fair contract, some 600 workers demonstrated against Providence Hospital in San Pedro

By Jorge Luis Macías

Hundreds of health care workers at Providence Little Company of Mary Medical Center in San Pedro took to the streets to protest what they see as bad faith contract negotiations by the hospital, which recently lowered its wage proposal.

The workers, who include licensed vocational nurses, respiratory therapists, housekeepers, nursing assistants, medical technicians, occupational therapists and physical therapists, voted in October 2023 to join the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) and have been negotiating a first contract since February.

At Providence Hospital in San Pedro, where there was no union, health care workers earn on average 24% less than at the hospital chain's unionized hospitals, including Providence Cedar-Sinai Tarzana Medical Center, where NUHW union members recently won a contract that raised wages by an average of 40%.

"107 employees got a raise, but the rest of us were kept at the bottom of the pay scale," said Regina Muñoz, 47, a licensed vocational nurse (LVN) who is part of the union's negotiating team. "In the current negotiations they are offering us less than what they presented to us at the beginning."

The hospital company is reportedly offering workers a raise of just \$2.35 an hour, or 5% annually or less over the next three years if they sign the labor contract.

"That money is much less than we want," Muñoz said. "No one can live with dignity on that and we are not willing to accept it." Muñoz told *La Opinión* that the membership in general is willing to go all the way and, if necessary, call a vote to authorize or not a strike. "Many of the employees have already discussed

that possibility," she said. "Everything will depend on the next negotiations."

She and her colleagues considered the company's offer "an insult."

She, who works in a unit with less serious patients, but who require long-term care, explained that in her area there are breathing machines and other devices that need to be on alert 24 hours a day.

"They [the hospital's negotiating representatives] don't even know that there is a lot of care required in that place; they don't know what we do and they have only been there, in the library, for the negotiations," said Regina Muñoz. "What they are trying to pay us is insulting, degrading and painful."

Regina Muñoz indicated that, on a day-to-day basis, there is an overload of work, because a single nurse has to care for up to 10 patients in one or two hours, when they require the medications.

Although she declined to answer whether she has seen or heard of a patient dying because they could not be properly cared for in a timely manner, she said that in the two years she has been working at Providence San Pedro, "We have had to call 911 because of the lack of care."

Unfair labor practices

The workers decided to picket after Providence San Pedro engaged in alleged unfair labor practices.

In fact, the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) filed charges against the medical center with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), after the hospital engaged in regressive bargaining by reducing its initial wage proposal.

"We put our health on the line for our patients during a pandemic, but Providence still wants to pay us as little as possible," said Judith Hernandez, a certified nursing assistant at the hospital. "We already have a severe staff shortage that will continue to get worse

until Providence agrees to start respecting our work."

In a recent union survey, 64 percent of NUHW members said staffing is too low to provide safe and timely care to patients and 59 percent said they had considered leaving the hospital in the past year.

"We are constantly short-staffed and patients often wait too long to get the care they need," said Veronica Gonzalez, a physical therapy assistant who works in the hospital's Sub-Acute Care Center.

"We don't have safe staffing levels right now, and we won't have them at the market level we need to support our families."

Not Charitable

Providence is one of the largest nonprofit health systems in the country, with 51 hospitals and more than 900 clinics, including many hospitals in Southern California.

The company, which did not respond to a request from *La Opinión*, according to unionized health workers, has \$8.4 billion in unrestricted cash and investments; it has also been criticized over the past year for aggressively trying to collect payments from patients who should have qualified for charity care.

In fact, in February of this year, Washington U.S. Attorney Bob Ferguson confirmed a settlement with Providence over its charity care practices and that it reimbursed an average of \$478 to thousands of patients.

The lawsuit filed by the Attorney General's Office was resolved when Providence agreed to forgive more than \$137 million in medical debt and reimburse more than \$20 million to patients who likely qualified for free or reduced-cost care.

Under Washington's charity care law, hospitals must provide free or reduced-cost care to patients who qualify, on a sliding scale based on their income and the size of the hospital system. Hospitals are required to inform patients about the option and check to

see if they are eligible for discounts.

The attorney general's office filed a lawsuit against Providence for failing to fully inform patients about their options, which it said "created barriers to affordable care for thousands of the most vulnerable Washingtonians."

Fighting for his mother

Among the protest contingent in front of Providence Little Company of Mary Medical Center was Andreas Frantz, an 18-year-old who was fighting to get his mother "Chris," who is a nurse, the respect she deserves at work.

"Fair contract now," read the sign the boy held. "My mother has told me that patients are not getting the attention and care they should be getting."

"Not long ago, she told me that a patient jumped from a second floor and left," Andreas said. "It sounds crazy, but in this place they should prioritize the safety of people ... they have to do something."

Lorenza López, who has worked in the hospital kitchen for nine years, said that, despite being paid little money - an average of \$17.00 an hour - "I have no choice but to endure, because at my age they don't give me work anywhere else."

Unrecognized heroes

Paul Ondo, a 57-year-old respiratory care practitioner, recalled that during the pandemic, Providence executives considered their workers heroes, "but now they treat us like zeros."

Ondo, whose base salary is \$43.00 an hour and lives in East Lakewood, told *La Opinión* that in order to survive with the high cost of living, the needs of an average family would be met with around \$7,000 a month.

"All costs have increased and that is why our fight is very important," he added. "Nobody wants to strike, but if a strike occurs, I am more than willing to do so."