

Sutter Solano union workers go on strike

Members picket for 24 hours at more than a dozen facilities

By RACHEL RASKIN-ZRIHEN/Times-Herald staff writer

Article Launched: 10/30/2008 08:01:32 AM PDT



Union workers strike in front of the Sutter Solano Medical Center in Vallejo on Wednesday morning. (Chris Riley/Times-Herald)

With beating drums, honking horns and shouts of "What do we want? - A contract! When do we want it? - Now!," several dozen purple T-shirted union workers picketed in front of Vallejo's Sutter Solano Medical Center on Wednesday.

The Sutter Solano picketers were among some 6,000 members of SEIU United Healthcare Workers-West who struck for 24 hours at more than a dozen Northern California health care facilities, union officials said. These include five Sutter Health facilities, five hospitals owned by Daughters of Charity Health System, and Alliance Clinic.

Union members have been working without a contract since June, said Daniel Kindschy, who lives in Vacaville and works in Sutter Solano's purchasing department.

"This is about patient care. We're trying to win a fair contract from Sutter. They've turned down everything we've offered and responded only with takeaways," Kindschy said.

Sutter officials say the real issue has "everything to do with increasing power, membership and money for UHW," according to an official statement.

"Our wages are as good or better than other hospitals," the Sutter statement notes. "The average wage paid to employees who work for the Sutter Health hospitals being struck by UHW is higher than the average paid to the same positions at other Northern California hospitals, according to the most recent data available from Allied for Health."

Nevertheless, several of the workers striking at Sutter Solano on Wednesday, said they're more concerned about job security than raises.

"They're cutting positions and we've already lost several departments, taken over by management," Kindschy said.

"We want to know that we're not going to come to work the next day and find ourselves without a job," agreed Tom McGinnes of Fairfield, Sutter Solano's lead phlebotomist.

With the nation's difficult economic times, Sutter employees are afraid the health care giant will try to maintain its profit margin by cutting and outsourcing jobs to other Sutter affiliates, said Caroline Wandrick, a central supply technician who lives in Vallejo. Wandrick and the other union members said this is already happening.

Sutter officials deny it.

"The union's current contract has job security provisions," said Sutter Solano's chief nurse executive Kim Trumbull. "The union reps admitted at our last session, that their demands are extreme, but they said, 'you have to start somewhere.' "

The union's demands are unreasonable, she said.

"They want a 25 percent increase and that's not affordable for Sutter Solano or anywhere else," Trumbull said.

At the core of UHW's strike are union officials' hopes of growing membership, according to Sutter's official statement. "Among the demands included in UHW proposals submitted to Sutter Health hospitals is language that would forbid the hospitals from talking to employees about unionization during a UHW organizing campaign - a provision that's worth \$7.8 million each year for UHW."

And that's above the nearly \$4 million it already collects, the statement said.