

**Headline: Contract fight turns ugly at hospital // News**

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# **Demand an End to Forced Overtime Shifts**

Byline: DARLA MARTIN TUCKER, Date: 05/29/06, Page: 13

Hospitals are wrestling with unions this year as labor agreements go into negotiations. Service Employees International Union will negotiate contracts this year at Community Hospital of San Bernardino, St.

Bernardine Medical Center in San Bernardino, Moreno Valley Community Hospital, John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital in Indio and Desert Regional Medical Center in Palm Springs.

Contentious talks were under way last week over contracts nearing their end at Riverside Community Hospital.

Negotiators for the hospital and the Service Employees International Union haggled May 23 over nurse staffing levels, mandatory overtime and whether to involve an independent arbitrator. Negotiations took place over pay, benefits and nurse staffing. The dickering continued May 25.

"It's been a very difficult two days of bargaining," union negotiator Dana Simon said. "Management hasn't been willing to discuss safe staffing and patient care proposals except to say, 'no'," he said. "It is quite likely that, in the next few weeks, we will schedule a vote among our members to authorize a strike if negotiations don't progress," Simon said.

The Service Employees International Union represents 1,500 workers at the hospital. The contract expires June 30. Nurses want the hospital to end "mandatory overtime," Simon said May 23. Management "reacted very negatively to the proposal."

Staff shortages force nurses to work 18- and 20-hour shifts, he said. The hospital refused to involve an independent arbitrator in the nurse-staffing dispute, Simon said. The hospital presented a proposal to the union that maintained a mandatory overtime policy, he said. "Most hospitals have banned mandatory overtime," he said.

"Throughout the hospital industry in California there is contract language that when there is a dispute over safe staffing levels, an arbitrator comes in to help them resolve the dispute," Simon said. "Riverside Community Hospital is absolutely refusing to consider that or anything even vaguely related to staffing issues."

"We feel very strongly that staffing should not be decided by a third party arbitrator because they have no stake in the outcome," said Tracy Dallarda, the hospital's vice president of marketing and public relations. "The administration works very collaboratively with staff to make those decisions." She declined to comment on other issues under discussion.

The union claimed in a May 18 release that Riverside Community Hospital sent five security guards and two German shepherd dogs to ward off union representatives and members in the hospital's parking garage. The workers arrived to hand out leaflets to employees. The leaflets contained updates on contract negotiations between the union and five hospitals including Riverside Community Hospital, the union release said.

The union representatives were standing in an employee parking garage entrance, which is not a mutually agreed-upon area for union officials to operate, Dallarda said. Three of the security guards were coming off duty and two were arriving for work. They had one dog with them, she said.

After receiving a phone call, the guards approached the representatives and asked them to move to the employee cafeteria or a conference room, she said. The workers returned to the garage after a half hour, she said. The guard dogs are docile and often visit pediatric patients, Dallarda said. "We have video of a union official petting the dog," she said.

Hospital chain HCA in Nashville owns the Riverside hospital and 181 other acute-care hospitals across the country.

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