



DC Nurses Strike for Patient Safety, Fair Contract

WASHINGTON, D.C.

REGISTERED NURSES at Washington Hospital Center, the largest facility in the nation's capital, went on a one-day strike March 4 to protest employer MedStar Health Systems' failure to address the RNs' serious concerns over understaffing and patient safety, as well as the corporation's takeover proposals at the bargaining table.

The hospital responded by locking out nurses for an additional four days, ultimately spending \$6 million on temporary staffing and security, according to a March 11 *Washington Post* article.

"We have called this strike because we want to ensure that this hospital is safe for our patients," said Jessie Ruehl, an emergency room RN at the hospital. "Our moral, ethical, and professional responsibility is to advocate for our patients, and we intend to do just that."

Ruehl went on to explain that due to the chronic understaffing, nurse turnover is a major problem at Washington Hospital Center, with 1,300 nurses leaving since

2005. Currently, National Nurses United represents about 1,650 nurses at the facility.

At 7 a.m. March 4, nurses gathered in the bitter cold on the picket lines in front of the hospital, chanting and waving signs reading, "On strike for safe patient care," and even a handwritten sign saying, "I am a safe nurse. I can't be at WHC." Nicole Combs, an ICU RN of six years at Washington Hospital Center, spent hours on the road in front of the hospital letting nearly every car that stopped for the traffic signal know exactly why the nurses were striking. "This is for you, sir," said Combs to one driver who nodded his head in approval. "This is for you and your family."

At noon, the nurses rallied with the help of some notable guests. Congressman Dennis Kucinich stopped by to show his support of the nurses, as did Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO. "They want more and more and more work from you and give you less and less to do it with," said Trumka. "I believe in what you stand for today. I come from a long line of caregivers. I understand your issues are our issues."

Besides the understaffing, MedStar has

proposed changes in the nurses' compensation structure that would result in a pay cut of as much as 25 percent for some nurses, and a loss of up to half of paid days off.

Ingrid Toussaint, a 32-year RN who has worked at WHC for a decade, said that she cannot face such a drastic loss in income as she approaches her retirement years. "We save lives," said Toussaint. "We just want fairness and the ability to advocate for our patients and ourselves."

Many of the nurses were surprised by the intense security presence at the hospital during the strike, complete with yellow "crime scene" tape used to cordon off the area where nurses were picketing.

On Wednesday, the nurses marched back into work as a group, resolved to continue with their bargaining and actions to pressure MedStar to make the improvements needed for them to take care of their patients and themselves. "We are all DC nurses today," said Karen Higgins, a Massachusetts RN and a copresident of NNU, at the rally. "I represent more than 160,000 nurses across the country who stand with you today." —Donna Smith

Hundreds of Washington Hospital Center RNs cheer during their strike rally March 4