

nurses and supporters gathered in front of Wilkes-Barre General Hospital to greet the night shift as they exited the building, officially beginning their 24-hour strike at 7 a.m.

Snowflakes were falling and the wind was icy, but the mood on the picket line was upbeat as the nurses marched and chanted. More and more striking nurses joined the four simultaneous picket lines, as did several doctors, PASNAP nurses from Community Medical Center in Scranton and Temple University Hospital in Philadelphia, members from more than a dozen other unions, the Northeast Area Labor Federation, and supporters from the community. Notably, nurses represented by SEIU joined the picket line from Mercy Hospital of Scranton, a nearby hospital which CHS is attempting to acquire. Back in November, Wyoming Valley nurses had spoken out against CHS at a public meeting about the sale of Mercy Scranton.

At noon, the striking nurses hosted a rally in front of the hospital, during which their solidarity was evident. Elaine Weale, an acute-care RN for 31 years, said she received positive reactions from the community as they passed by. "Several of us were asked how we were able to tolerate such frigid temperatures and biting wind," said Weale. "We responded 'We work in worse conditions every day' and continued picketing."

As dusk fell, the strikers gathered for a candlelight vigil. Huddled close together, their faces glowing in the soft flames, the nurses listened as their coworkers gave more somber speeches about strength and solidarity. They reflected on why they fight so hard for their profession: responsibility to their patients, to their families, and to all those who put their trust into the caring hands of a nurse.

The next morning, Wilkes-Barre nurses and supporters gathered again on the same corner. When the strike was officially over at 7 a.m., the nurses walked back into the hospital as a group, with a renewed sense of mission and their heads held high. The one-day strike was a success, but the fight far from over.

"Though we know that this is only the beginning of a long struggle against Community Health Systems, we are prepared to continue fighting for as long as it takes," affirmed Bill Cruice, PASNAP executive director. "CHS is trying to make an example of our unionized nurses here in Wilkes-Barre, but they will soon find out the power of solidarity." —*Emily Randle*



Despite Recession, Kaiser RNs Win Stellar Contract

CALIFORNIA

BUCKING NATIONAL trends during this severe recession, some 17,000 registered nurses working at northern and central California Kaiser Permanente facilities in February ratified a new three-year contract that included no concessions and built even more patient protections into a pact that was already the best in the nation.

Notably, the California Nurses Association was able to negotiate this new agreement without protracted bargaining or fight, and even before the current contract expired, showing the collective power of the RNs.

"I am pleased that Kaiser did not try to use the recession to squeeze concessions from the nurses because that would have led to massive mobilization and a potential strike," said Zenei Triunfo-Cortez, RN, chair of the Kaiser bargaining council, and a CNA/NNOC copresident. "This proposal protects our patients, defends our hard-fought economic and practice standards in a tough economic environment, and demonstrates again the strength of our professional union, CNA/ NNU, and the unity of Kaiser nurses."

The new contract includes more than 20 professional and economic enhancements for all classifications of registered nurses and nurse practitioners. It spells out improvements on working conditions, such as fixed schedules so that nurses can better balance their work and home life, and on staffing issues, such as the formation of a new regional education committee devoted to GRASP, the acuity system that Kaiser uses. On the issue of compensation, nurses will receive a 5 percent increase in compensation each year.

"There's something for everybody to like in it," said Deborah Burger, a gastroenterology

and infusion center RN at Kaiser Santa Rosa, a CNA/NNOC copresident, and a member of National Nurses United's council of presidents. "The call center nurses are now able to develop an assessment tool for RNs and get a little more break time away from their desks. The home health nurses got Kaiser to recognize that home health visits take more time, and requires an acuity tool for measurement. And it also acknowledges that even in these tough economic times, nurses still deserve pay increases so that they don't fall behind the cost of living."

While nurses are "ecstatic" about the new contract, Michelle Vo, a clinic RN at Kaiser Fremont and a member of the CNA/NNOC Board of Directors, said that the agreement is "only as good as the people who enforce it. If it's not enforced, it doesn't mean anything, it's just writing on a piece of paper." Despite posting healthy profits the last few years, netting \$1.7 billion in profit for the first three quarters of 2010 and \$2.1 billion in 2009 according to various business journal reports, Kaiser has been shutting down many outpatient clinics, and closing or consolidating unprofitable hospital units such as pediatrics and psych, forcing patients to drive farther for care or go without. Vo said nurses are committed to challenging Kaiser on every cut. "I'm glad Kaiser didn't want to pick that fight [on the contract]," said Vo. "But now the fight is over direct patient care, whether at the bedside or in the clinic."

Burger said the Kaiser contract sets a solid precedent for all other nurses currently bargaining and preparing to bargain contracts. "No matter what anybody says, there's still a nursing shortage," said Burger. "This contract raises the bar for other systems and puts pressure on them to work with their nurses to provide the best care you can." —*Staff report*