

CATHY WURZER: Here's one of our top stories. The Union that includes 15,000 Minnesota nurses have just announced they'll hold a vote on whether to strike again. They made the announcement at a news conference this morning. This announcement comes a couple of months after the nurses had a three day walkout from hospitals across the state. MPR News Health Reporter Michele Wiley joins us right now with all the details. Hey, Michele.

MICHELLE WILEY: Hey there.

CATHY WURZER: So we know the Nurses Union is going to hold a strike vote, but what are the details here?

MICHELLE WILEY: Right. So nurses announced today they're taking another vote to authorize the strike. So it's important to note this does not mean they're automatically going out. What this means is that if a strike is approved by 2/3 majority of members, it gives Union negotiating teams the ability to call a strike.

They say voting will take place on November 30, so we should know that night or the next day what the results are. If approved, the Union will then have to decide the manner of the strike, when it will be-- as you mentioned last time, it was three days.

They'll have to make that decision again. And then Union officials have to give hospitals 10 days of notice before the walkout begins. I think the hope is always that they'll reach a deal before they have to walk out, but today's action shows you where they're at.

CATHY WURZER: OK. We're talking 15,000 nurses. Where and when could this happen? Let's start with the where first. Who does this affect?

MICHELLE WILEY: Right. So it's 15 hospitals in the Twin Cities and Twin Ports, so that includes mHealth Fairview, Riverside, Southdale, Saint Joseph's, and St. John's, Ascension St. Mary's in Duluth and Superior Wisconsin, Methodist, Abbott Northwestern, Mercy, United, Unity, Children's Hospital in Minneapolis and Saint Paul, and North Memorial, and St Luke's-- so 15.

CATHY WURZER: OK. They did a three day walkout back in September, and that didn't move the needle, apparently. So what are Union leaders saying about negotiations to date?

MICHELLE WILEY: Yeah. So negotiations have been going on for a long time. It began in March, and they've been in talks since that walkout in September. It sounds like Union officials were hopeful at first that the strike had made a difference, but they haven't seen solid commitments to the proposals they've made. They say that there have been some promises to look into issues, but nothing concrete.

The Union also alleges that some employers have been engaging in unfair labor practices like appealing to members directly through the mail, managers encouraging nurses to take the deal, and issues like that. The Union says they've reported that to the State Bureau of Mediation Services, though I have not independently confirmed that.

CATHY What do you know about the sticking points in hammering out a potential contract?

WURZER:

MICHELLE So one of the biggest issues has been staffing. Nurses say they want a say in how their floors are run-- some of the staffing issues that have been ongoing. It's a pretty big sticking point. It sounds like they haven't made a huge amount of progress at the bargaining table on that. There are, of course, other issues that include safety, wages, staff retention, and then just overall workplace conditions.

CATHY OK. If there's a strike, this does not come at a great time, obviously, because we're hearing about hospitals overrun with cases of RSV and the flu and possibly COVID. So what are hospitals saying about the impact of a possible strike in coming weeks?

MICHELLE Right. The nurses actually directly mentioned this at the press conference. I should say I haven't heard back from hospitals yet. I've reached out for statements from all of them, but haven't heard back. But Laura Myers is a pediatric nurse at Children's Minnesota in Saint Paul.

LAURA MYERS: You may be asking yourselves, why would we choose to announce a strike vote on the heels of working for organizations that are bursting at the seams with patients, have limited movement, and overcrowded emergency rooms? This is exactly why we are fighting. We are fighting because working conditions in our organization are getting worse by the day.

MICHELLE Myers says they're being asked to do more with less. They're dealing with staffing issues while they're trying to address this intense uptick in cases of RSV and flu, as you mentioned. MNA President Mary Turner said at one point, this isn't something that they want to be doing. They don't want to go on strike and be picketing in December or January when it's cold outside, but members want to see action and progress made, and this is what they're asking for.

CATHY You've been following this for a while. Is there anything that sticks out to you as you follow the story?

WURZER:

MICHELLE Yeah. One thing Union officials talked about today at the press conference was that they may be more willing to accept third party independent mediation in the process.

WILEY:

This is something hospitals have been pushing for, and the Union has been somewhat reluctant to accept in part because they were concerned if they brought in a mediator, they would no longer be able to speak to hospital officials directly about their concerns. But at the press conference today, Turner said it may be something that's on the table now at this point in the negotiations.

CATHY All right. Michelle, thank you so much.

WURZER:

MICHELLE Thank you.

WILEY: