

CATHY WURZER: Our top story-- Minnesota nurses have authorized another strike set to take place on December 11 at 16 hospitals in the Twin Cities and in the Twin Ports if a deal can't be reached. The nurses and hospitals have been in negotiations since March and are currently working without a contract.

ANGELA BECCHETTI: We don't want to be out on that sidewalk. We want to be at the bedside caring for our patients. But the conditions our executives have created in our hospitals are unsustainable for our nurses, but most importantly, for our patients. Patients are waiting for hours and hours for our hospital bed. Nurses are leaving the profession in droves.

This is what we've been fighting to fix for nearly nine months in our contract negotiations. But our hospital CEOs with million dollar salaries insist there's nothing more they can do. We refuse to accept the new normal in our hospitals. Nurses deserve better. Patients deserve better. That is why we are announcing today our intent to strike at 17 hospitals throughout the state.

CATHY WURZER: That's nurse Angela Becchetti at a news conference earlier this morning. MPR News Health Reporter Michelle Wiley was there. She's been covering this story and she joins us right now. Thanks for being here.

MICHELLE WILEY: Thank you.

CATHY WURZER: What do we know about the nurses' plan so far?

MICHELLE WILEY: Right. So you may have heard in the cut, she said 17 hospitals. It is actually 16 hospitals. And the walkout is contingent on if they don't get to a deal in the next 10 days. If they can't reach an agreement, the strike will begin at 7:00 AM on Sunday, December 11.

Now, for many of these nurses, including, I believe, all in the Twin Cities, they've set the strike to last until December 31. So they'd be off the job, walked out for three weeks. Nurses at St. Luke's, and Duluth, and Two Harbors have instead decided to do an unlimited strike. So there is no end date.

CATHY WURZER: OK. This happens right in the middle of the holidays, right in the middle of this big influx of flu cases and RSV patients. What are they saying could happen around all that?

MICHELLE WILEY: Yeah. Just actually a couple of weeks ago, officials from hospitals across the state got together to warn the public about these viruses and the impact it's already having on the system. And the nurses did bring this up at their press briefing this morning. Angela Bicchetti, who we heard at the top, is a nurse at Abbott Northwestern.

ANGELA BECCHETTI: Influenza, the RSV, happens every season. The hospitals know that. But now, after the pandemic, we are stretched even thinner. But that is why staffing is so crucial to obtain in this campaign.

We don't want to be out there. I don't want to be out there after being out with Allina. I don't want to go out there. But I will for my patients. Enough is enough.

MICHELLE WILEY: And the holiday season could also make it challenging for hospitals to find staff to cover. During the last strike in September, there were lots of reports of travel nurses coming in and picking up those shifts while the nurses were on strike. And I can imagine that would be more difficult to find that coverage this time around. Governor Tim Walz also raised those concerns about that earlier today.

TIM WALZ: We're not underestimating the impact that this will have. My first and foremost concern is the safety and the ability, as it was through COVID, for a Minnesotan, if they need care and they need a hospital bed, that there's one available and they get it with the staff to be there, but also to make sure that we're protecting the needs of the staff that are there.

We already know this is a very difficult profession. We don't want to lose people in that. And so this negotiation is critically important.

CATHY WURZER: Now, what have the hospitals said in response to all of this?

MICHELLE WILEY: Yeah, so officials with Allina Health said this morning that they're deeply disappointed in the decision. They mentioned this wave of viruses that we're dealing with, that this will remove further resources. And they want to focus on bargaining. They believe they can reach a deal.

Now, the nurses have said one of the biggest sticking points in negotiations is staffing. They want more staffing, they want more of a say in staffing. And the Union has said that that's an area where they're just not seeing progress. There are other issues like safety and wages where the union and the hospitals seem to have found more common ground or gotten closer together.

It depends on which bargaining team you're talking about, and what system. But really, overall, it seems like staffing is where there's still a lot of division.

CATHY WURZER: Help me out here-- the health care systems have talked about wanting to bring in a third party mediator to help move things along-- where does that idea stand?

MICHELLE WILEY: Right, so months ago, this was a proposal the union was not interested in. They said that was because once the mediator's involved, hospital officials would no longer be physically at the bargaining table to hear their demands. That concern seems to have been resolved and the union said yesterday that it has authorized the use of a mediator.

But it's up to individual bargaining teams to make these decisions since there are so many different systems involved. Now, at a press conference today, the nurses didn't say exactly which bargaining teams have opted for this route. They said they'd likely use a mediator once they're closer to an agreement than they are now.

CATHY WURZER: You know, can you help me out here-- it's a little confusing-- earlier this week, there was an announcement that two additional hospitals were going to join in on the strike vote. Then one of them reached a deal. I think that was Moose Lake then you mentioned Two Harbors-- these are hospitals in Northeastern Minnesota. What's happening there?

MICHELLE WILEY: Right, yeah, so this was a little confusing. The union announced these two additional hospitals were joining-- that's, as you mentioned, Moose Lake, St. Luke's Lakeview. And then Moose Lake, it was announced that they had reached a tentative deal.

So the nurses at that facility are not participating in this strike action. It was announced and then very quickly, it sounds like they reached a deal. For St. Luke's Lakeview, they are still involved. They took the strike vote and they are one of the 16 hospitals that will walk out on the 11th.

CATHY WURZER: OK. And it's a long list, right? Can you run down the list of hospitals affected?

MICHELLE WILEY: Yeah, absolutely. So it's M Health Fairview. It's Riverside, Southdale, St. Joseph's, and St. John's. At Essentia Health, it's Saint Mary's, and Duluth, and Superior. At Allina Health, it's Abbott Northwestern, Mercy, United, and Unity. Children's Minnesota in Minneapolis and St. Paul, St. Luke's in Duluth and Two Harbors, North Memorial in Robbinsdale, and Methodist Hospital in St. Louis Park.

CATHY WURZER: That's a lot. OK, so the strike has been authorized. Dates are set. What happens now?

MICHELLE WILEY: Well, they're still bargaining. There are some sessions, from what I hear, are scheduled today. There are some tomorrow, and I expect more next week as well. And the hospital is required to give this 10-day window before walking out.

So there's time to reach a deal and avert a strike. We'll just have to see.

CATHY WURZER: All right, Michelle Wiley, thank you so very much. Good report.

MICHELLE WILEY: Thank you.

CATHY WURZER: That's Michelle Wiley, MPR News Health Reporter.