



Photo by Mark Pynes

Striking nurses at McKenzie-Willamette Memorial Hospital can put down their picket signs since hospital administrators approved a settlement contract.

Hospital's OK ends long nurses strike

By MARIAN GREEN
Of the Emerald

Except for the fine print, the longest hospital strike in Oregon's history is over.

The 86-day-old nurses strike at the McKenzie-Willamette Memorial Hospital in Springfield ended Thursday afternoon when hospital administrators approved a settlement contract.

On Tuesday striking nurses voted to allow their bargaining unit, the Oregon Nurses Association, to ratify the contract, said Jan Dial, the nurses' chief negotiator.

Representatives for the nurses and administrators were working Thursday on final wording of the document, the last formality before the bargaining units can give final ratification, said Joe Johansen, chief negotiator and an assistant hospital administrator, at a press conference Thursday.

Dial said the labor dispute has resulted in a "tremendous loss of trust."

"We will be looking at everything extremely carefully, checking for accuracy," he said of the contract.

The tentative two-year contract, which replaces a contract that expired June 30, includes a 9 percent salary increase in the contract's second year; a section banning work interruptions, including sympathy strikes; an ONA membership option for replacement nurses; and a recall procedure for striking nurses, Johansen said.

The nurses, on strike since July 14, will begin returning to work informally over the weekend and formally on Monday, Johansen said.

"By late next week or early the following week, we should be back to normal."

"We're glad to see it settled," Dial said. "It's been very long and very exhausting."

Nurses involved in the strike will be recalled strictly by seniority, providing they're qualified
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for the available job, Johansen said. Nurses who were "militant" during the strike won't be discriminated against for job placement, he said.

"All of the nurses were qualified and were working on at least a satisfactory basis," he said of the striking nurses. "If they weren't, they wouldn't have been working there."

Of the 157 nurses who originally went on strike, 15 have resigned and 25 returned to work, Johansen said. At present, the hospital has 67 positions available for recalled strikers.

Johansen said he anticipates that 25 strikers will be placed on a recall waiting list and eventually, through natural attrition, will be returning to work.

"If we can find ways to bring the nurses back, certainly we will," Johansen says.

Dial says the waiting list number will be smaller.

"There are lots of resignations that the hospital is not aware of," he said.

Under the contract, 25 nurses hired as replacements during the strike and 23 nurses who crossed the picket lines will be free to continue working for at least six months, Johansen said.

"We gave the 'new hires' a firm commitment of continuity of employment."

Although Johansen predicted "some tension, some animosity," between nurses who walked off their jobs and those who remained, he said any problems would be "short-lived."

Although the hospital was losing revenue at the beginning of the strike, workforce reductions and policy changes enabled McKenzie-Willamette to climb back past the "break-even" point later in the strike, Johansen said.

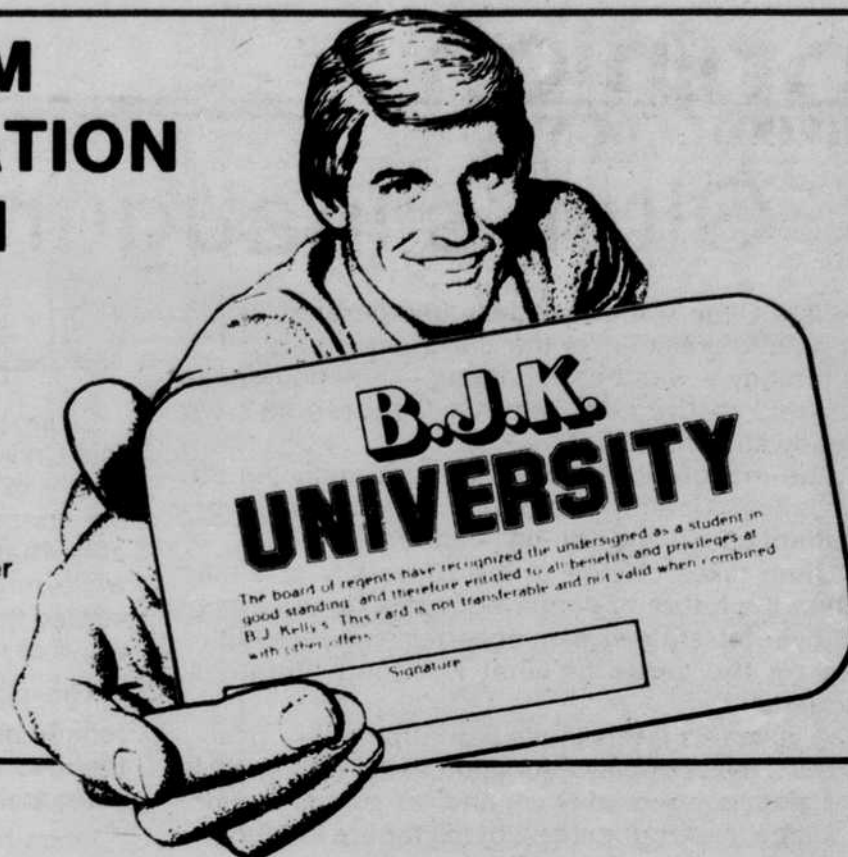
Dial said, however, that the labor dispute lost the hospital some patients who may not return.

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