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—Contributor.....Joyce Marcel
—Contributor email.....joyrand@sover.net
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Notes from editor (not for publication):



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

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1 Potential of nursing strike looms over BMH

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2 With mediation fruitless, nurses prepare for strike vote;
3 management urges 'productive dialogue' as hospital faces \$14.5
4 million budget deficit

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5 TEXT BODY:

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6 Brattleboro Memorial Hospital may be on the brink of a
7 nurse's strike.

8 This is not good news for the hospital, as it comes on top
9 of a disappearing chief executive, the resignation of its chief
10 financial officer, an influx of hospital financial experts, the
11 recalculation of a \$14.5 million budget deficit that will take

12 between two and three years to eradicate, and an ongoing top-to-
13 bottom examination of costs and services that includes mediation
14 with two unions.

15 The unions are not happy about the way this mediation
16 has been going.

17 The Brattleboro Federation of Nurses (BFN) is a local
18 union of the Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals,
19 American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO.

20 "Through mismanagement, BMH administration has dug
21 a \$14 million hole and is now asking nurses, frontline health care
22 workers and low-paid union workers to bear the brunt of the
23 economic pain," said Heather Riemer, the executive director of
24 AFT Vermont, the largest AFL-CIO union in Vermont, in a press
25 release.

26 BMH vehemently disputes the language of these charges.

27 "Brattleboro Memorial Hospital remains committed to
28 reaching a fair and responsible agreement with the nurses
29 represented by the Brattleboro Federation of Nurses," said BMH
30 Chief Nursing Officer Jackie Ethier. "We value our nurses and the
31 critical role they play in caring for our community, and we are
32 eager to continue negotiations in good faith."

33 The BFN was in negotiations with the hospital over
34 proposed cost-cutting measures such as a wage freeze for three
35 years, cuts to differentials (extra money allocated to front-line
36 caregivers for overtime and late-night shifts), a 4% reduction of
37 retirement contributions, and cutting off family insurance plans
38 for spouses who qualify for health insurance options from other
39 sources, among other things.

40 The BFN ended mediation last week and announced it
41 was going to hold a strike vote. It claims that "over 80 percent of
42 the nurses at BMH have committed to going on strike if
43 management continues to make these proposals," Riemer said.

44 As of March 15, no further mediation has been
45 scheduled.

46 “Unfortunately, the BFN chose to leave the most recent
47 mediation session and cancelled the next scheduled meeting
48 with the federal mediator,” Ethier said. “At a time when
49 productive dialogue is most needed, we believe stepping away
50 from the bargaining table does not move us closer to a
51 resolution.”

52 BMH, she continued, “has been transparent about the
53 significant financial challenges the hospital is facing.”

54 “Our proposals are designed to stabilize the hospital’s
55 finances so we can continue providing care to the community for
56 the long term while maintaining competitive wages and benefits,”
57 Ethier said. “Simply maintaining the status quo contract without
58 addressing these realities is not financially sustainable.”

59 While BMH management is eager to return to the
60 bargaining table, the nurses are beginning the process of
61 organizing a strike.

62 “The strike vote period will be March 18 to March 22,
63 and ballots will go out electronically to the BFN membership on
64 March 18,” said Sarah Shames, a union organizer with AFT
65 Vermont. “We expect results to be announced on March 23.”

66 If a majority of nurses vote to strike, “the BFN Bargaining
67 Team may choose strike dates and deliver a 10-day strike notice
68 to the hospital — a legal requirement for health care workers —
69 at anytime after the votes are counted,” Shames said. “Through
70 the whole process, BFN and BMH management may continue to
71 negotiate.”

72 **Matters of sustainability**

73 Economically, a strike would be extremely costly to the
74 fragile finances of the hospital.

75 “If the nurses decide to strike it would be really
76 unfortunate and very sad for the hospital,” said Dr. Tony Blofson,
77 acting co-CEO of the hospital. “It would be very unfortunate for
78 the community, which is supporting the hospital and really wants
79 it to stay open.”

80 Blofson estimated that a strike would cost \$1 million to
81 \$1.5 million.

82 Hiring traveling nurses or strike nurses to replace the
83 striking nurses would be costly, he said, calling that expense
84 “financially really unfortunate.”

85 “We don’t want that at all,” Blofson said. “We would
86 love to go to negotiate and go back and forth.”

87 Tracy Ouellette, BFN president, told *The Commons* that
88 the burden of cost-cutting is harder for the nurses than on,
89 perhaps, the more highly paid doctors and administrators who
90 might more easily handle living an uncertain economy struggling
91 with inflation.

92 “The hospital is \$14.5 million in debt right now,”
93 Ouellette said. “It’s unclear where the debt has come from, but it
94 has accumulated for many years, probably since about 2017.”

95 During the last contract negotiation, “the hospital
96 administration stated they want to make up the deficit in a two-
97 year time period,” she continued, calling the situation “a very
98 high reach for the hospital, since it took so many years to
99 accumulate this debt.”

100 “And the way they’re going about relinquishing their debt
101 is to put a three-year wage freeze on the entire campus — the
102 entire hospital. Not just for bargaining members or nurses. But
103 what they were asking is to cut all of our differentials, decrease
104 our retirement contributions, increase our health care
105 contributions, decrease our earned time allowances and then
106 take a three-year wage freeze.”

107 In the state of Vermont, health insurance premiums are
108 the most expensive per capita in the country, Ouellette pointed
109 out.

110 “Your cost of living is very expensive,” she said. “So this
111 is not sustainable to remain as a nurse at Brattleboro Memorial
112 Hospital.”

113 The hospital remains eager to resume negotiations with
114 the nurses.

115 "We remain ready to return to the bargaining table at any
116 time and hope the BFN will engage in meaningful negotiations
117 rather than continuing to repeat the same 'status quo' proposal,"
118 Ethier said.

119 "Our shared goal should be a contract that supports our
120 nurses while ensuring the long-term stability of the hospital and
121 the services our community depends on," she said. "BMH
122 remains committed to working collaboratively toward a solution
123 that is fair, responsible, and sustainable for our staff, our patients,
124 and the broader community."

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