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Apr 16, 2014, 2:44pm EDT

SEIU members picket Dimensions after turning down final offer from health system



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Workforce tensions at **Dimensions** Healthcare System flared again Wednesday as members of its main bargaining unit picketed outside **Laurel Regional Hospital** and Prince George's County Hospital Center.

The job action came after members of Service Employees International Union Local 1199 said they rejected a last and final contract offer from the health care system. The union, which represents 1,600 workers in the two-hospital system,

says the proposal put forth by Dimensions would put "safe staffing" at risk, would allow the hospital to cancel nurses' shifts and could essentially bust their union. Members have been working under short-term contract extensions [since its prior labor pact expired in April](#). The union filed charges with the **National Labor Relations Board** April 2, claiming the hospital is not bargaining in good faith.

However, while health system officials said they had put forth a final offer, they were not the ones walking away from negotiations. "We are committed to working with the Service Employees International Union to reach new contracts that mutually benefit all parties," said [Erika Murray](#), a spokesperson for Dimensions Healthcare System. "SEIU's activities are a distraction from good faith negotiations as well as an attempt to disrupt patient care services. Unfortunately the union's behavior does nothing to help reach an agreement on a new contract."

But union members say they had no choice but take job action after receiving a final offer proposal from system executives that would enable management to cancel shifts of staff at will and re-assign nurses to clinical areas outside their area of training. "There may not be enough staff and in terms of nurse satisfaction, no knowing whether we'll have work that week is a big deal," said [Jennifer Epps](#), vice president of the registered nurses sector of the union. Wages are also at issue, they said.

They say the health system also proposed it have the option to cancel the more than 30-year-old collective bargaining agreement with the union in the event of a sale or merger. Dimensions is in talks about a developing relationship with the statewide **University of Maryland Medical System** for their proposed [\\$655 million teaching hospital at Largo Town Center](#).

[Murray](#) said she did not want to address the complaints away from negotiations. "I do not want to get into specific disagreements via the media. Let's have that discussion at the bargaining table," she said.

However, she did respond to the allegation of an attempt at union busting. "We view the union as our partner, we've been partners since our inception and we will continue to be partners with the creation of a new hospital," she said.

She stressed the picket was not impacting operations, she said. "During these actions, all Dimensions facilities were open, fully operational and in no way, shape or form was patient care impacted," [Murray](#) said.

Even as negotiations drag on, the hospital and Prince George's County's have been pursuing a plan to shore up its chronically cash-starved health care system, [which includes the Largo hospital project](#), the possible affiliation with the University of Maryland Medical System and a big push to lure more doctors to the county. Key aspects of the new hospital and turnaround plan include lowering its expenses and improving scores on Medicare quality surveys and other third-party benchmarking reports. There's also the issue of paying off pension obligations to retirees — all things that involve collective bargaining.



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