Nyack, New York hospital nurses strike in fifth month

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About 425 registered nurses are continuing their strike, now in its fifth month, at Nyack Hospital in Rockland County, north of New York City. The nurses have been on strike since December 21 of last year. The nurses are represented by the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) and this is their third strike in seven years.

The strike was provoked by conditions of chronic understaffing of nurses, forced overtime, opposition to merit pay increases as well as the demand by management that the nurses lose five days annually from their combined holiday, vacation, personal and sick time. Management has also made the outlandish demand that nurses must be sick for four days per incident before they can start using their sick days.

It has been a common practice for nurses to be "mandated," forced to work 16-hour double shifts without any prior notification due to the understaffing and nursing shortage at the hospital. Management originally offered a 10 percent wage increase over five years for all nurses with a possibility that some would earn an additional "merit pay" increase of up to 12 percent, for a potential maximum of 22 percent during the contract proposal. This was recognized by the nurses as a divisive attempt by the ownership to deny them equal pay, and to pressure nurses to accept unsafe nurse-to-patient ratios, as those nurses who complain would most likely be denied merit pay increases.

Management has been able to keep the hospital open by using a Colorado company to hire temporary nurses from throughout the United States. They also issued a threat that nurses who did not return to their jobs by April 24 risk being permanently replaced by strike-breakers—new nurses hired during the strike. Only four nurses have reportedly crossed the picket line in response to this threat.

A tentative agreement made between management and the union was rejected by a more than 2 to 1 vote by the strikers at the end of April. The only differences in this offer was that management would "consult" with the union bureaucracy about staffing levels, and the demand for merit pay was exchanged for an annual maximum bonus of 1 1/2 percent, an actual reduction in pay from the original proposal.

While Nyack Hospital reported over $7 million in profits in 1997, nurses complain of chronic shortages of basic supplies such as blankets and clean linen.

The NYSNA represents 33,000 members in New York, but the union leadership has done nothing to mobilize them or the working class in the New York area in defense of the striking nurses. Instead, they have launched a disorienting campaign of candlelight vigils, and have urged their members and supporters to write letters to county and state politicians and the hospital board of directors.

This lack of initiative by the NYSNA bureaucracy has only emboldened hospital management to begin a nationwide recruiting and advertising campaign to hire permanent replacement for the strikers. While many striking nurses feel that the nationwide nursing shortage will prevent them from being replaced by permanent strike-breakers, their continued isolation and growing financial stress due to the strike only work to management's advantage.

The Nyack nurses struggle is symptomatic of the general nationwide trend of corporate downsizing—particularly in the related fields of HMOs (health maintenance organizations) and health for profit corporations—to maximize profits at the expense of the workforce.

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