

Contract settlements announced between nurses and two New York medical centers

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Contract settlements were announced this past week between the New York State Nurses Association and two of New York City's biggest medical complexes, St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center and Mount Sinai Medical Center. The agreement at St. Luke's-Roosevelt came one week before a January 3 strike deadline. At Mount Sinai no deadline had yet been set. Regulations require a ten-day notice of intent to walk off the job.

The four-year deals at both hospitals apparently involve significant concessions on health benefits. The 1,300 nurses at St. Luke's-Roosevelt would be required to contribute to their health care premiums for the first time, \$25 a month in pretax payments for single coverage and \$100 a month for a family of four or more. A similar provision would be imposed on the 2,200 nurses at mammoth Mount Sinai, one of the biggest and best known hospitals in the country.

In exchange for this giveback, St. Luke's-Roosevelt agreed to a brand-name drug plan that would allow nurses to get help in paying for such drugs in cases of devastating illness.

In addition, the proposed contract, which the St. Luke's-Roosevelt nurses are scheduled to vote on January 3, provides a total of 8 percent in pay raises over three years, plus a bonus of \$1,500 for the past year, during which these nurses have worked without a contract.

At the third major medical center involved in current negotiations, Montefiore in the Bronx, the 2,300 nurses have submitted a formal strike notice as of January 10. The union, while acknowledging that the Montefiore

nurses face the additional problem of severe understaffing, is apparently hoping to work out the kind of "compromise" agreed to at the other institutions.

A comment by a member of the negotiating committee for the nurses was significant. "In the real world, people pay premiums—OK, we'll live with that," said Betty Ann Lynch, seeking to justify the acceptance of the health care giveback. "But the drugs can wipe you out. We're nurses, and we care about our colleagues. We took a strike vote because of the other nurses who were sick."

The offhand reference to "the real world" suggests that the union was replying to internal opposition and suggesting anything less than acceptance of concessions was unrealistic. This is the same argument that has been used in one concession deal after another, including the recent contracts imposed on state employees in New York and Connecticut.

This "real world" is the world of the bankrupt profit system presided over by the two big business parties, who demand one attack after another on nurses, teachers, state employees and other sections of workers, while shoveling billions of dollars in bailouts to the banks.

As the *New York Times* points out in a news report that strongly implies that the concessions demanded of the nurses are completely reasonable, "Health plans in which employees do not contribute to their premiums have become increasingly rare. Nationally, only 6 percent of workers with family health coverage sponsored by their employers make no contribution to their premiums ... according to a 2011 survey by the

Kaiser Family Foundation.”

This kind of propaganda obviously leaves out the other part of the comparison—the much larger numbers of workers some 20, 30 and 40 years ago who obtained health care coverage, along with pensions and other benefits, as part of their terms of employment. The union collaborates completely in this race to the bottom, in which the latest round of attacks on living standards and social conditions become the “new normal” that supposedly only the most extreme and irresponsible employee could possibly object to.

The NYSNA has 37,000 members in New York State, and nearly 6,000 of them were preparing for strike action. Furthermore, these strike deadlines coincided very closely with contract expirations and possible strike action affecting more than 35,000 New York City transit workers, members of Transport Workers Union Local 100, and 22,000 building service workers in Manhattan office buildings, members of Service Employees Local 32BJ. Local 32BJ members are facing a January 1 strike deadline. The transit workers’ contract expires January 15, but their union has not called for strike authorization.

It should also be kept in mind that the Occupy Wall Street encampment was evicted from Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan on November 15, only a few weeks before these looming contract deadlines. Behind the scenes, there can be little doubt that the advocates of surrender to what is called the “real world” were concerned about the possibility of strike action coinciding with a continuing occupation. The union officials, closely allied to the Democrats as well as to New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, were relieved to see the eviction of Occupy Wall Street, and now are concentrating their efforts at dividing the nurses, janitorial workers and transit workers, keeping their struggles isolated and trying to work out concessions contracts before the growing anger of working people erupts.

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