

ISO covers for New York nurses union

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The pseudo-socialists of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) continue their work of covering up for the treachery of the trade unions, finding new ways to justify givebacks, cultivating their own relations within the union apparatus, and helping to subordinate the working class to the Obama administration and its reelection campaign.

The latest example of the ISO's role is its stance on recent contract settlements agreed to between the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) and some major medical centers that are members of the League of Voluntary Hospitals in New York City.

As the WSWs has explained, in connection with the first two of five recent contract agreements, the NYSNA negotiated separately with each institution and agreed to meager wage increases and concessions on health care coverage. (See "Contract settlements announced between nurses and two New York medical centers," 31 December 2011.)

The settlements with St. Luke's Roosevelt and Mount Sinai Medical Center were followed within a short time by similar deals with Columbia-Presbyterian and Montefiore Medical Center, and then, a few days ago, a contract with Flushing Hospital in Queens that covers 430 nurses.

According to the ISO website, socialistworker.org, the contracts, covering some 10,000 nurses at these major institutions, weren't "outright victories," but were still "a much-needed boost for the labor movement in the face of the employers' all-out assault on so many fronts." The ISO writer, Sean Petty maintains this despite the fact that the recent settlements include significant concessions on the crucial issue of health coverage, an issue that is at the center of the onslaught on the working class. Petty doesn't bother to explain how a "much-needed boost" is at the same time not a "victory."

Petty's fervent backing for the nurses' union leaders,

and his effort to cover up this latest betrayal, is highlighted by an earlier report from the ISO on elections last year for officers to the NYSNA. In September 2011, Petty reported the "landslide victory" of a "reform" slate for the NYSNA Board of Directors.

Identifying himself as a nurse at Jacobi Hospital in New York City, Petty wrote as an active supporter of the New York Nurses for Staffing, Security and Strength, the "S3" slate, which won a clear majority on the board. He quoted the new president-elect of the union saying, "It's a new day for RNs and patients in New York." Petty went on to boast, "the S3 slate has vowed to accept no concessions, build solidarity, and mobilize a fight."

The vague promise of solidarity is heard from every single union bureaucrat. Its hollow character emerges soon enough. Less than four months after the ISO's claim, concessions have indeed been accepted.

Also noteworthy is Petty's suggestion that the election of the "reform" opposition in the NYSNA "could shift dynamics within the New York City labor movement." He argues that the new leaders will no longer "[accept] the framework of concessionary bargaining," but that is exactly what they have just done.

The reference to the "labor movement" is particularly important. This is aimed at sowing the illusion that the union is an instrument of the rank and file. Rather than exposing the class gulf that exists between the workers on the one side and the union apparatus on the other, and consequently the need to build new, independent organizations of struggle, the ISO works tirelessly to give the unions a "left" coloration. In this way, it helps the union bureaucracy reinforce the political domination of the Democratic Party and bourgeois politics over the working class.

The ISO claims that contract agreements were reached because the nurses authorized strike action.

Petty quotes one official, a vice president of the union, as saying that the reason the employers agreed to settle was “Strike vote, strike vote, and strike vote.”

Petty also refers to the emergence of the Occupy Wall Street movement in the last three months of the year. It is “safe to suppose that some of the city’s largest and most profitable hospitals didn’t want to find out what having four hospitals on strike at the same time would look like in the era of Occupy Wall Street,” he writes. “The League may have had a suspicion that a high-profile action by members of the most trusted profession in the U.S. may have galvanized the mass sentiment in support of the Occupy movement.”

The employers and the Democrats were certainly concerned that the mass sympathy for Occupy Wall Street could translate in a far broader struggle, involving nurses and other sections of the working class. But their servants in the labor bureaucracy were no less frightened of such a prospect.

Petty does not remind his readers, but the nurses’ contracts coincided with those of 22,000 building service workers in commercial buildings, and 35,000 bus and subway workers. The NYSNA accepted concessions rather than run the risk, as Petty himself puts it, of “galvaniz[ing] mass sentiment” against the bankers and their political lackeys.

Amidst the anger reflected, even in a very limited fashion, by the Occupy movement, the transit, building service and nurses unions were determined to avoid a conflict that could have gotten out of hand. An additional important factor is the approaching election season, in which Barack Obama will be portrayed, by the NYSNA and the rest of the unions, as deserving of reelection.

The ISO’s particular specialty is covering up for “reformers” like the new leadership of the NYSNA. Along the same lines it has praised the National Nurses United (NNU), which has posed as a rival to the older American Nurses Association. The ISO regularly promotes NNU Executive Director RoseAnn DeMoro as a “left.” In the Wisconsin struggle against anti-worker legislation and elsewhere, however, the NNU and their fellow bureaucrats opposed a general strike and helped the Democrats strangle the movement.

The contortions of the ISO and its spokesmen are completely consistent with their record of defending and boosting the unions. This has been their role in last

year’s battle in Wisconsin, the betrayal of the Chicago Teachers Union, the sellout of the Verizon strike and the current struggle of the Cooper Tire workers in Findlay, Ohio. In every case, they seek to make themselves useful if not indispensable allies of the union apparatus, and through it, of the Democratic Party, using occasional “left” phrases to keep workers subordinated to these bulwarks of the capitalist status quo.



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