

4,500 nurses walk out in northern California

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On May 1, thousands of protesters marched and rallied around the Bay Area, and several unions called one day strikes. Campaigners for the Socialist Equality Party were able to talk to workers and students at several of these events.

Some 4,500 members of the California Nurses Association (CNA) walked out at various hospitals in northern California to protest the latest contract concessions being demanded by Sutter Health.

According to the CNA those concessions include the elimination of paid sick leave, increases to the out-of-pocket health care costs of workers and their families, and an end to retiree health plans.

In addition, Sutter Health is planning to cut its less profitable services such as specialized pediatric care at their hospitals in Burlingame and San Mateo. The planned service cuts focus on pediatrics and psychiatrics. Working families will have to travel farther to receive the care they need, or forgo treatment if the added burden is too great.

SEP campaigners spoke with several registered nurses at the Alta Bates center in Berkeley. Keesha Johnson expressed the need for solidarity. “If one union goes on strike they all should. We need to keep workers working. We’re all single parents, we all have bills to pay, we all don’t have gas in our car. Today the SEIU has weakened us by not supporting the strike.”

Oscar Medina added, “The SEIU is basically stealing from us. Unions agreeing with the hospitals is killing us. If we lose the struggle here it doesn't just hurt us but all the nurses.”

When asked if he thought the union leaders were really fighting for his interests he said, “The SEIU leaders definitely aren’t, but if we get our own leaders

in there they will.”

The Service Employee International Union (SEIU) did not participate in the strike and has been involved in disputes with the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW). The NUHW split off from the SEIU in 2009 and has presented itself as a worker-led union ready “to hold health care corporations accountable to the public interest,” according to their web site.

Some workers at the rally though, recognized in the NUHW and the CNA the same tactics of defeat used by the SEIU. The May Day strike was the third one-day strike called by the CNA against Sutter Health in the past year. One nurse, who preferred to remain anonymous to avoid reprisals said, “We should already be on strike indefinitely if we want to win this.”

Elsewhere, in Oakland, there were occasional skirmishes between police and protesters throughout the day that intensified after night fell. At least 25 people were arrested and the Alameda County Sheriff’s Department deployed its armored car in an act of intimidation.



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