Nurses in California go on one-day strike

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On November 1, 3,200 nurses and healthcare workers in California went on a one-day strike at seven Sutter Health facilities. The strike was called by the California Nurses Association (CNA), an affiliate of the AFL-CIO. Sutter Health has responded by hiring temporary replacement nurses and locking out the striking nurses for five days. This is the sixth one-day strike staged by the CNA since September 2011.

Sutter Health is an $11.7 billion medical enterprise that hides massive annual profits behind its carefully maintained non-profit status. Since 2005, Sutter has raked in more than $3.7 billion in profit, which it has ferreted away in offshore assets, real estate investments and for-profit subsidiaries that operate sweetheart contracts with the non-profit hospital networks. According to tax records, the Sutter CEO was paid $2.7 million in 2009; the CFO received $1.5 million; the regional president $2.5 million; and the regional executive received $2.9 million.

This group of executives has made an art out of profiting from human sickness and the provision of healthcare by stripping away less than profitable services performed at any of their 100 medical centers, by expanding the workload of Sutter employees, and by drastically cutting into the benefits and pay of workers.

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* visited the strike at the Alta Bates Medical Center in Berkeley, California and conducted interviews with striking nurses.

The union staged a rally at noon. Several union representatives spoke. Two local Democratic Party candidates—one for Berkeley City council and the other a state assemblyperson—were given the stage. Every speaker called for support for the Democratic Party in next week's election, several openly endorsed Obama. The crowd was directed to repeatedly chant the most vapid of slogans, "We're gonna beat back the Sutter attack."

The demands made in the speeches were of a calculatedly minimal nature, ultimately boiling down to two points: get Sutter back to the bargaining table; and vote Democrat.

Sutter Health workers are organized under two unions: nurses and hospital techs are under CNA; while housekeeping and various service personnel are organized under the Service Employees International Union. SEIU settled a contract with management one month ago, in the midst of the CNA contract dispute. No effort was made by the leadership of either union to coordinate the two struggles. The CNA strike was isolated. The SEIU leadership did not direct its workers to support the nurses' struggle, and it certainly did not call for a sympathy strike.

None of the striking Sutter workers have been given a penny in strike pay. Because of management lock-outs, every one-day strike keeps the workers without employment for five. The five day lock-out is based on management's claim that the minimum hire period for labor replacements is five days. Nurses pointed out to the WSWS that this claim was proved false by management deploying shorter scab hires in the past.

When asked about strike pay, one nurse responded: "We have never even heard of people receiving strike pay … You're the socialists, you tell us." The WSWS reporters responded by pointing to the history of increasingly well-paid union bureaucrats eliminating strike pay. This is part of a concerted policy of isolating striking workers, and weakening their strikes. They cited the recent example of the United Steelworkers union, which dispersed $100 grocery gift cards to locked-out Cooper Tire workers earlier this year while sitting on $150 million strike fund.

When asked why the nurses did not engage in a protracted strike against Sutter Health but instead were being repeatedly called out on one day strikes, the nurses told the WSWS that the standard line of the

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union reps is that they would not have the support of the workers for such a move. Two nurses said that they felt that the real reason why nurses were not conducting such a strike was precisely because they did not receive strike pay. “We have financial obligations, families, bills, health care payments.”

The nurses urged the WSWS reporters to investigate why they received no strike benefits. The nurses asked at this point in the interview to be given anonymity in the article.

According to the US Department of Labor 2012 Labor Management reporting form (LM-2) for the CNA, the union sits on total net assets of $87.8 million. Some $81 million of this is in cash. In 2012, $2.8 million was paid out in union administration salaries. Over a million was funneled into campaign contributions. At the same time, the filing reveals that $0 was paid out in strike benefits.

From 2001-11, CNA gave $8 million in political donations, the overwhelming majority of it to the Democratic Party in California. It threw its full weight into the campaign to support Jerry Brown for governor in 2010.

The Obama administration, at the head of the Democratic Party, has been leading the attack on nurses and health care workers across the country. As part of the health care reforms imposed by the Obama administration and the Democratic Party-led Congress, each of the nation’s 5,700 hospitals is expected to reduce costs by an average of $2.6 million over the next ten years. Sutter Health is attempting to use this as a justification for its own assault on workers’ pay and benefits.

In California, the attack on health care is now being led by the administration of Jerry Brown, also a Democrat. Both the Democrats and Republicans are united in their insistence that workers pay for the budget deficit and the economic crisis. The trade unions, including the nurses unions, support Brown and are determined to keep the struggle of workers from coming into conflict with the Democratic Party. They attempt to channel workers into backing the Democrats and raise a series of limited demands against Sutter Health.

The nurses with whom the WSWS spoke were displeased that the strike was used as a platform to agitate for the Democrats and for Obama. “I feel that was very inappropriate,” one said.

Another volunteered, “Our fight isn’t just against Sutter, it is an international one.” A WSWS reporter responded by pointing to the extremely impoverished condition of medical workers in Greece.

The nurses expressed their disgust with the growth of extreme inequality across the United States. The very richest are getting richer, she said, “and they are doing it on the backs of workers.”

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