

Nurses in California go on two-day strike

Joseph Santolan
23 November 2012

On November 20, over 3,000 nurses, nurse practitioners and medical technicians in the California Nurses Association (CNA) Union went on a two-day strike at eight facilities in Northern California owned by the giant health-care firm, Sutter Health. The strike comes twenty days after the last one-day strike staged by the CNA and is the seventh since September 2011. As with previous strikes, the nurses will be locked out by Sutter Health for five days, replaced by scab labor brought in by Sutter from around the country.

Sutter Health is demanding a string of concessions from the nurses, including the elimination of paid sick leave, mandatory extension of overtime work, the reduction of rest time, and the dramatic increase in employees' out-of-pocket expenses for health coverage.

Sutter has carefully maintained the legal pretense of being a nonprofit institution. Under this guise it has raked in nearly four billion dollars in profits in the past six years, and has paid an average of \$2.5 million annually to each of its executive officers.

The leadership of the CNA is actively seeking to isolate the striking workers. Sutter Health workers are organized under two unions: nurses and hospital techs are under the CNA, while housekeeping and various service personnel are organized under the Service Employees International Union. The SEIU settled a contract with Sutter just over a month ago, in the thick of the CNA contract dispute. No effort was made by the leadership of either union to coordinate the two struggles.

Reporters for the *World Socialist Website* visited the Alta Bates Medical Center in Berkeley Tuesday and spoke with picketers.

As with past strikes, the SEIU leadership did not direct its members to support the nurses' struggle. SEIU members crossed the CNA picket line. A handful of SEIU members showed up at the Alta Bates picket

line, but CNA nurses told the WSWs that they were from a different SEIU local and were not employed at the affected Sutter facilities.

The CNA is engaged in the piecemeal settling of contracts with Sutter Health. The CNA's own press release on the strike states: "a number of Sutter hospitals, including Mills-Peninsula Health Services in San Mateo County, Sutter Santa Rosa, Sutter Lakeside in Lakeport, Sutter VNA of Santa Cruz, Sutter Roseville and Sutter Auburn Faith have all reached agreement on new contracts with nurses." The nurses at these facilities did not go on strike; during previous strikes—prior to the signing of a contract in isolation from the rest of the union—they had also been walking a picket line.

One of the nurses who spoke with the WSWs said that the union leadership's strategy seemed to be to "settle at small places, weakening the bigger places."

Every separate contract that is signed weakens the collective power of the striking nurses and tech workers. The CNA is closing deals with Sutter at small hospitals, allowing the progressive isolation of the workers at larger Sutter Health facilities. Sutter Health is thus tightening a noose around the nurses and technicians at large facilities like Alta Bates in Berkeley, and it is doing so with the support of the CNA leadership.

These new contracts expire in 2014. The strategy of Sutter seems to be one of weakening and then breaking the resistance of nurses at their largest facilities by progressively isolating them, getting them to accept major concessions and cuts in healthcare benefits, and then use this as the new baseline when the nurses' contracts expire in two years at the smaller facilities.

The nurses with whom the WSWs reporters spoke repeatedly stressed that the strike was not simply in defense of their wages and benefits, but of the right to quality public health, which Sutter's demands

threatened to undermine. The reporters pointed out that the attack on the right to health care was being spearheaded by the Obama administration, which is using the so-called ‘fiscal cliff’ to conduct an all-out assault on Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security.

The WSWS reporters said that this demonstrated the need for a political struggle to break with the Democrats and build an independent party of the working class. A nurse responded by saying that she had voted for Obama as “the lesser of two evils.”

Several nurses expressed their agreement on the need for the political independence of the working class. Workers needed to organize as a class, one said, and not simply on the basis of their trade or the company at which they work. They expressed solidarity and concern for workers at Hostess and at Wal-Mart.

The perspective of a break from the two parties of big business—the Democrats and Republicans—and the independent organization of the working class is fiercely opposed by the CNA leadership. The umbrella union organization, National Nurses United (NNU), and CNA, its largest member union, threw their full backing behind Barack Obama and the Democratic Party in the last election.

Rose Ann DeMoro, head of the CNA, heralded the reelection of Obama on the National Nurses United website. “We celebrate the election results, and offer our congratulations to President Obama and the other NNU-endorsed candidates who won on Tuesday.”

The last strike called by the CNA was calculatedly timed to provide political endorsement to Obama and the Democrats on the eve of the election. Nurses were directed to strike, and were then locked out by Sutter Health for five days, which union leadership could have as a platform for endorsing the Democratic Party.

The CNA, both in its piecemeal negotiations with Sutter Health and in its support for the Democratic Party, is preparing defeat for the striking workers.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact