California nurses go on weeklong strike

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On May 17, over 3,100 nurses and technicians in the California Nurse's Association (CNA) began a strike scheduled to last seven days at five out of eleven Northern California Sutter Health hospitals. Some 1,400 nurses at two Hospital Corporation of America-affiliated San Jose hospitals will join the strike May 23 and 24. A sixth hospital in San Leandro called off the strike after Alameda County released a letter of intent to acquire the facility from Sutter Health. This weeklong strike comes after eight one- to two-day protest strikes held by the CNA since contract negotiations began over two years ago in 2011.

At issue are more than 75 individual concessions. These include increases in nurses' out-of-pocket costs for individual and family health coverage, the elimination of health coverage for part-time nurses, and severe cuts to paid sick leave.

Even without cuts though, the current working conditions are unacceptable.

Sutter has been repeatedly fined for serious health and safety violations, endangering nurses, other health care workers and staff. Striking nurse, Eric Koch explained to the World Socialist Website "Sutter was fined $142,000 by Cal/OSHA for intentionally not fixing the isolation rooms. They knew they weren't working. These rooms quarantine others from the dangers of H1N1, TB, etc., and that's a slap on the wrist. It would cost them more to fix the issue…

"We had a respiratory therapist who contracted meningitis. Sutter failed to notify the policeman and therapist of the danger. The therapist suffered a lot of damage and his inability to function has prevented him from returning to work. He cannot work due to vascular damage, and after that, Sutter cut off his health insurance."

As part of a divide-and-conquer strategy, Sutter has settled for relatively untouched contracts in smaller hospitals in San Mateo, San Francisco, Sonoma, Marin and Lake counties, leaving larger hospitals in Berkeley and Oakland isolated. This will provide a precedent for similar attacks on nurses at the smaller hospitals once their contracts expire in 2014. Sparing no expense, Sutter Health has flown in scabs from the southern US, paying as much as $9,000 for the week, according to striking nurses Jemila Pereila and Laura Rutherford.

Nurses interviewed by the WSWS were quick to point out that easy contract settlements at smaller hospitals demobilize thousands of Northern California nurses, clearing the way for the current concentrated assault on Berkeley and Oakland nurses. The first of these eight strikes, held in February 2011, mobilized 23,000 nurses. This week's strike involves only 3,100 nurses and technicians. The CNA's official literature celebrates these piecemeal contract deals as victories, exposing the CNA leadership as partners in Sutter's efforts to reduce labor costs.

The CNA presents the concessions Sutter demands as simply a matter of greed or mismanagement. This myopic view covers up the role of the Democratic Party and the general attack on health care across the country. Each election season they contribute millions of dollars to the Democrats, but the cuts Sutter Health demands are a logical consequence of the Obama administration's so-called health care reform law, which requires each of the nation's 5,700 hospitals to reduce costs by an average of $2.6 million over the next ten years.

As Eric Koch observed, "Nowadays, both parties are controlled oppositions. There is no such thing as a right wing and left wing—only birds have such wings. It's a bread and circus act—like the Romans in a period when they were declining."

Because they have no interest in waging a struggle that would pit them against the Obama administration, the CNA has held a string of demoralizing, isolated one- or two-day protest strikes. After each strike, nurses

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are locked out for up to five days, and are not given a single cent of strike pay. At the same time, the US Department of Labor reports indicate that the CNA possesses $81 million in cash as of 2012.

Among the nurses themselves, there is strong opposition to benefit cuts and insufficient staffing, which threaten not only nurses, but patients as well. Official CNA materials show that strikes are typically approved by super majorities of between 81 and 94 percent. The way forward, however, is not through the union, which has exposed itself as little more than a servant of corporate management and the big business political establishment that are mandating these same attacks.

We call on nurses and other health care workers to follow the example of New York school bus drivers and take the struggle into their own hands! The way forward is through the creation of rank-and-file committees, independent of and in opposition to the entire big-business political establishment.

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