Workers, community fight Brooklyn hospital closures

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Hospital workers occupied part of Interfaith Medical Center last Friday in response to the diversion of ambulances away from the financially troubled hospital in Brooklyn, New York. Interfaith's CEO, Patrick Sullivan, issued the order to turn away ambulances Friday afternoon as a money-saving measure, one day after New York State declared that the hospital had defaulted on its debt agreement.

Shortly after Sullivan's decision, dozens of hospital staff surrounded the CEO's office, demanding that it be rescinded. Sullivan refused, challenging the board to fire him instead. Fearful of the chanting protestors, he remained holed up in his office until police arrived to escort him out.

Sullivan, who earlier this month submitted his resignation effective the end of January, got his wish and was immediately removed from his post Friday. The chief medical officer subsequently notified the Fire Department that Interfaith would resume accepting ambulances.

The turmoil comes more than a year into the Brooklyn hospital's bankruptcy. The doors have remained open during the past months through emergency funding from New York State, as preparations are made for the final shutdown.

The latest round of state funding, agreed to in late December, would provide $3.5 million for January with an additional sum promised for February. However, the Dormitory Authority of New York State last week claimed that Interfaith refused to cooperate with closure plans, including the transfer of its clinic to another Brooklyn hospital. As a result, the state agency is withholding the emergency funds.

With losses reaching up to $5 million a month, Interfaith could be unable to make payroll as soon as this week, according to a report in *Crain's*. A hearing is scheduled in Albany this week to decide Interfaith's immediate fate.

Interfaith is just one of five Brooklyn hospitals targeted for closure by New York's Democratic governor, Andrew Cuomo. Across town at Long Island College Hospital (LICH), trustees from SUNY Downstate, the current owner, are set to vote on a proposal that would dismantle the full service hospital. The plan, put forward by real estate developer Fortis Property Group in conjunction with NYU Langone Medical Center, would maintain some medical services including a stand-alone emergency room. However it would eliminate inpatient services and set the stage for the conversion of medical buildings into condominiums. The Brooklyn neighborhoods surrounding LICH have luxury rental prices that rise to obscene levels.

The pending closures of both Interfaith and LICH emerged as a major issue during last year's mayoral race. Mayor Bill de Blasio cynically used the threatened shutdowns to propel his campaign—even staging an arrest at a rally in support of LICH.

The fingers of the de Blasio administration are all over the proposed deal at LICH. The first deputy mayor, Anthony Shorris, was formerly a senior vice president at NYU Langone. The medical center added its name to a shelved plan put forward in December that was identical in the real estate aspects but differed in offering only urgent care, rather than an emergency department. However, with no inpatient services, the distinction becomes irrelevant. It is highly unlikely that seriously ill patients would be taken to a stand-alone emergency room, only to be transferred to a full service hospital, rather than go to the latter directly.

It remains to be seen whether de Blasio will attempt a face-saving deal at Interfaith similar to the one

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presented at LICH. However, as with LICH, any maneuver is sure to suit the plans of de Blasio's fellow Democrat in Albany, Governor Cuomo. In 2011, Cuomo convened a workgroup to propose a restructuring of the hospital system in Brooklyn, led by investment banker Steven Berger. The workgroup recommended the closure and consolidation of five hospitals, using the crisis to open up the hospital system to private investors.

Bill de Blasio, for all his "progressive" rhetoric, offers no alternative to subordinating health care to profit interests. Governments at all levels are engaged in a cost-cutting drive, transferring more costs to workers. Obamacare at the Federal level was preceded in New York by massive cuts to Medicaid. A 2011 agreement cut $2.3 billion in funding to the program, including a two percent reduction in the hospital reimbursement rate. The healthcare workers' union Local 1199, one of de Blasio's early and most forceful supporters, fully endorsed the agreement.

Interfaith's financial troubles are in large measure attributable to the inadequate reimbursements it receives from the state and federal governments for treating patients who overwhelmingly rely on Medicaid or Medicare. The hospital serves an impoverished working class section of Brooklyn with poverty levels above 30 percent and disproportionately high rates of diseases like diabetes and HIV.

Patients and workers at Interfaith explained the importance of keeping Interfaith open.

Asia Robinson, a Crown Heights resident, left the hospital after her son was treated for a high fever. "Interfaith is my hospital," she said. "Overall it's good. I never had any complaints. As soon as we got here they took my son in, no waiting. At other hospitals you can wait hours. You can plan to camp out all day."

Addressing the threatened closure, she said, "It's beyond ridiculous. If the hospital is in trouble, I don't know what it is, but don't shut it down. Then what? No one in government seems to care. There's enough money when it's something they want, but forget it if it's not benefitting them, the politicians. I'm a Democrat, but even with them it boils down to money."

Another patient, Denovia Anderson, echoed those sentiments. "This is my hospital. I had my baby here, and I've been coming here for at least 34 years. I don't know why they are trying to close it down. They say it is a money thing, but look all around here, where are all of these people going to go for health care?"

Denovia said she had joined in a rally last year against the shutdown, after stumbling upon it when leaving Interfaith following asthma treatment. "I am hoping they come up with something to keep it open. They talk about Obamacare, but where is the care going to come from? You may have care, but you have nowhere to go.

"I hope de Blasio does something," she continued, "but I heard Cuomo's budget is calling for tax cuts. Whatever else they do, the Democrats and Republicans are going to cut taxes. It is not fair. We should come up with something better than what is going on. I think healthcare is something you should not have to pay for."

A security officer with four years at Interfaith, who requested his name not be used, remarked, "The neighborhood needs this hospital. If it closes, it will cripple this area big time. There are a lot of elderly, children, and teens who use it. We do rehab, psych, and a lot of other services they depend on."

He rejected the notion that the hospital's financial troubles should lead to its closure. "This is America. There's plenty of money. They can just print money. People need this hospital, just like they need a fire department and a police department. Look at what happened during [Hurricane] Sandy. They diverted people here when other hospitals were shut down. What would happen if something happened at Boys and Girls or at Robeson," he asked, referring to two large high schools in the area. "This hospital needs to stay open. It's a good hospital. We need more support."

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