

Nurses at Boston's Brigham and Women's prepare strike vote

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On May 21, IBEW Local 2222 held a “Family Day” at the site of one of its regular Verizon pickets in Boston. Attendance at the event was low, but news was circulating of the Friday walkout by AT&T workers in San Diego and a pending strike vote by nurses at Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital.

In Massachusetts, striking Verizon workers still haven't been told whether their unemployment compensation applications have been approved. The IBEW does not have a strike fund. A Verizon worker who discussed the issue with WSWs reporters pointed out that Governor Charlie Baker, whose administration approves unemployment claims, is preparing attacks on public transit workers while delaying benefits for Verizon strikers.

WSWS reporters also spoke with Trish Powers, the chairperson of a Massachusetts Nurses Association chapter that represents 3,300 workers at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston (often referred to as the Brigham). Powers was supporting Verizon workers, who also had attended an information picket at the hospital on May 17.

Powers commented on the Verizon strike that Verizon is a “billion dollar company, and coming down on the little guy. It's just not right, it's disgusting.” She raised the need to fight the two-tiered wage system and the company's demand that it be able to send workers long distances “at the drop of a hat.”

When a WSWs reporter said that workers from all industries must join together in a common fight, Powers responded with the example of mass protests in 2011, saying, “I agree, because we're all in this. All you have to do is turn on the national news, you look at Wisconsin.”

Nurses at Brigham and Women's, part of Partners HealthCare, have been in negotiations for a new

contract since the beginning of September 2015. Partners, using tactics similar to those of Verizon, is trying to foist its “last and final offer” on the nurses with the help of a federal mediator. The nurses, 3,300-strong, have scheduled a strike vote for May 31.

Partners HealthCare was formed in 1994 in a merger of Brigham and Women's with Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH), and in the last two decades the organization has acquired many other Massachusetts hospitals, including Newton-Wellesley Hospital, McLean Hospital and the North Shore Medical Center.

In the year ending September 30, 2014, Partners had income of more than \$11 billion, up more than \$400 million from the previous year. Its Form 990 listed 19 executives and doctors who made more than \$1 million in the year that fiscal year, including a package of close to \$2.7 million for CEO David Torchiana.

Brigham and Women's, before forming Partners with MGH, was the product of a 1980 merger between the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, the Robert Breck Brigham Hospital and the Boston Hospital for Women.

It now has almost 800 beds and encompasses 12 city blocks in Boston's Mission Hill neighborhood. Approximately 28,000 patients—including Level 1 trauma victims—are treated there each day, and the hospital has 20,000 employees.

Partners and the Brigham both qualify as not-for-profit corporations under Massachusetts law, despite their billions in yearly revenues and lavish compensation for executives. In addition, MGH owns the adjacent building in which the 4-star Liberty Hotel is located. Wealthy business people and tourists pay top dollar for a room in what used to be the Charles Street Jail, and MGM collects rental income.

When asked about the not-for-profit status of the Brigham, Trish Powers responded, “Well, it's a joke

that they call it a non-profit. The Brigham itself made \$179 million, I believe, just in one of the recent quarters. Our CEO, Betsy Nabel, makes over \$2.4 million.”

Powers explained a code team as a team of medical professionals who save patients through CPR and other techniques, as is sometimes depicted in TV dramas. Nabel, said Powers, “cut a code team citing that it cost a half million dollars a year. Coincidentally, she got a half-million-dollar bonus. So that’s pretty sad.”

Brigham and Women’s is among the top 10 hospitals in the United States and, according to Powers, does “face transplants, double-lung transplants,” and other state-of-the-art procedures. Nonetheless, the nurses who make this medicine possible are facing stagnating wages and cuts in benefits, and are anticipating attacks on their pensions. Nurses at the top step for wages have not had a significant raise since 2009.

Partners is using trickery to deny benefits to new hires. New nurses are given “per diem” appointments, which are not eligible for health insurance or accrued sick time, but are then expected to work 40 hours per week. Others are hired in at 24 or 32 hours per week so that Partners can avoid giving them health insurance. In a scheme resembling a company store, Partners is making new hires buy insurance that it sells.

“So not only will they be paying more money and have less choice, but the money’s going back into the profit of Partners. That will be their only choice for insurance,” Powers said.

Staffing levels are inadequate, she said, leading to stress. During a recent emergency “they mandated the nurses then to stay over their shift, the next shift, because they didn’t have enough staff on that day. So they haven’t been hiring. We have nurse’s aides and things like that that help us out, and they’ve eliminated all of them, pretty much. In one building, they’ve totally eliminated them.”

In a hospital where patients are sometimes violent toward nurses—recent examples include a nurse being punched in the face and a nurse having a knife held to her throat—management has also provided inadequate security. When the union raised this issue in negotiations, Powers said, “They said that it wasn’t our business; security at the hospital.”

Nurses at Brigham and Women’s do not get health insurance after they retire, and instead have to wait for

Medicare eligibility. They also do not receive supplemental coverage, Powers said. After describing the stress—and even violence—experienced by nurses, she said that “I work in a trauma unit, so I’m looking to do that ’til I’m in my late 60s in a trauma unit because if I retire early I don’t have any health insurance, even though I work at a hospital.”

In preparing for a possible strike, the nurses held an information picket attended by approximately 1,500 people on May 17. Nurses from the Dana Farber Cancer Center, Boston Medical Center, Tufts New England Medical Center, Children’s Hospital, and Beth Israel Hospital attended, along with Verizon workers and ironworkers. “We’re fighting not just for the nurses, we’re fighting for everyone,” Powers said.



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