

Massachusetts: Nurses at Brigham and Women's hospital authorize one-day strike

John Marion and Mike Ingram
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In a vote called by their union, nurses at Brigham and Women's hospital in Boston voted overwhelmingly on Monday to authorize a one-day strike. According to a press release on the web site of the Massachusetts Nurses Association, 2,345 voted in favor of the strike authorization while 115 were opposed. Of the 3,300 registered nurses involved in the contract struggle, approximately 75 percent participated in the vote.

The union is required by contract to give management ten days notice before a strike actually occurs. The earliest possible date will therefore be June 24. Negotiations have dragged on for 19 sessions since last September, and the nurses have been working without a contract since June 1.

The nurses are fighting for better wages, better staffing, and preservation of their benefits. Brigham and Women's, owned by Partners HealthCare, is trying to force through a two-tiered benefits scheme that includes Partners-controlled health insurance for new and part-time nurses.

According to a June 10 MNA press release, management has used bait-and-switch tactics to lure nurses into its "flex insurance." When it was introduced six years ago, the rates for the insurance were low, but they quadrupled quickly for part-time nurses. Hospital management's demands also include cutting eight sick, vacation, or personal days per year along with Family and Medical Leave Act policy changes that will further hurt nurses.

While the union contract includes step raises, the hospital is seeking to cut cost-of-living increases to 1 percent over the next three years, with that amount reduced by half for nurses who are already at the top of the pay scale. Outside the Inn at Longwood Medical Center, one of the two locations for the strike vote, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters talked with a nurse

who has 37-and-a-half years of experience but would receive only \$1.04 per hour in raises over the next three years under the management plan.

Starting wages for nurses at the Brigham are \$31 per hour, or slightly less than \$64,500 for a full-time worker with no overtime. The Boston area is one of the most expensive in the country, with rents above \$2,000 a month for one-bedroom apartments in some neighborhoods.

Nurses at the Brigham are also fighting for adequate staffing levels in a hospital that provides cutting edge care. Night shifts in the thoracic intermediate care unit (TICU) were understaffed before the contract fight began; rather than increasing staff, Partners has shifted nurses from the day to the night shift, resulting in understaffed day shifts. Patients in this unit include recipients of lung transplants.

Partners had income of more than \$11 billion in its 2014 fiscal year, 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 ending September 30, 2014, including a package of close to \$2.7 million for CEO David Torchiana.

Brigham and Women's CEO Dr. Elizabeth Nabel took home a \$1.3 million salary in 2013 and earned hundreds of thousands of dollars more by sitting on other corporate boards. Medtronic, which in recent years has grown by swallowing other medical device companies, paid her \$175,000 that year to attend four meetings of its board. According to the *Boston Globe*, the National Football League is paying her "an undisclosed amount of money" to consult for them on concussions.

The nurses' union, which has no strike fund, views its vote to authorize a strike as a tactic to force management concessions in upcoming negotiations

with a federal mediator. Brigham and Women's has already responded by threatening a five-day lockout during which it would hire 700 scab nurses.

On June 13, WSWS reporters spoke with Kristen Hicks as she left the Boston voting location. As an indication of the frustration that led to the strike vote, she said that "the two professions in the world that least want to strike are nurses and teachers ... we became nurses because we love to care for people." When asked whether management takes advantage of this sentiment, Kristen replied "absolutely."

About current working conditions, Kristen said, "you work really hard for 8 or 12 hours, you go, go, go, go, you're taking care of your patients as best as you can, and their families." Even on a 12-hour shift, "some units have breaks, some we just eat when we can."

For Kristen, the two biggest issues are adequate staffing—for the safety of the patients—and wages. "The profession of nursing should be paid more across the board," she said. "Massachusetts nurses are the second-highest paid nurses in the country after California. A starting nurse in Massachusetts at Brigham and Women's earns 66 percent of what a starting nurse in California would earn."

Noting that new nurses at the Brigham are required to have a Bachelor of Science degree, Kristen said, "if they expect a nurse to come in with \$40,000 or \$50,000 or \$60,000 in debt, we need to see increases."

Janet, a nurse with decades of experience, told our reporters "I hope the hospital listens to us for a change, that we're at the bedside, we're taking care of human beings, you can't just judge the staff on an acuity tool."

"This is a great hospital, I'm proud to be there," she said, but Brigham and Women's has the opposite perspective. "It's all about money with them."

When asked where management would find 700 replacement nurses, Janet didn't know. However, she replied that "they'd have a difficult time, and the care couldn't possibly be what we do."

As she left the vote, Connie said "we've had a wonderful, wonderful turnout ... we think we're going to get the vote overwhelmingly."

A WSWS reporter asked whether Partners is trying to create a two-tier system and Connie said, "yes, that's absolutely what they're trying to do. They're going to force all new hires into taking a lesser package."

Of management's approach to contract negotiations,

she said "they came in [and said] 'this was it, we have to have this,' and they really haven't negotiated."



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