

Vote “no” on the Sharp nurses contract: Nurses have the right to study the deal!

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The Socialist Equality Party urges nurses at Sharp Healthcare in San Diego to reject the contract that the United Nurses Association of California is seeking to push through in shotgun votes this week.

In November, nurses voted overwhelmingly to strike after rejecting the company’s “last, best and final offer.” Nurses are demanding competitive salaries in line with other institutions, nurse retention, retirement benefits, higher levels of staffing and patient safety.

The UNAC has been engaged in closed-door negotiations with Sharp for months. In late November, the union abruptly cancelled a three-day strike after the company agreed to measures that would guarantee union dues from new nurses. Almost immediately after the strike was called off, the UNAC announced a “victory”—the details of which are being kept from nurses until they attend ratification meetings.

No serious gains for nurses could be won on this basis. Moreover, if the deal was truly a victory, the union would not be trying to ram through a vote before allowing nurses adequate time to study and discuss the agreement.

On the first day of voting, and throughout the negotiations on social media, many nurses expressed frustration and anger. One nurse commented, in a post that was quickly deleted from the union Facebook page, “after 29 years in this union we have never been asked to ratify a contract we have not been able to read days before a vote. Very Unorthodox.”

Based on details obtained by the WSWs, the contract apparently gives entry-level clinical nurses a wage increase of 12 percent in the first year, 5 percent in the second year and 4 percent in the final year of the contract. For advanced clinicians and per diem nurses, the first year pay increases are 9.25 percent and 8 percent, respectively. This would leave the nurses with a base pay hike of between 17 percent and 21 percent over the course of the contract—for most nurses, less than the final proposal they

rejected overwhelmingly. Meanwhile, the cost of living continues to get higher and higher.

One modification to the new contract is the requirement that all new hires join the union. Nurses will be required to pay dues for the first 90 days of hire, after which they would have to notify the union within a 5-day window of their intent to withdraw. While the union has claimed that this will help solve the problem of “recruitment and retention of well-trained and experienced nurses,” nothing could be further from the truth.

What has happened? The union has assisted the company in keeping wages low in exchange for guarantees to its own income stream. Moreover, the contract does nothing to improve the retirement plans or retiree medical benefits for veteran nurses, or address the other major grievances of nurses.

In recent years, at Sharp and at many other hospitals, management have given nurses additional charting and safety checks to perform—yet nurses are expected to care for the same number, or sometimes more, patients during their shifts. In addition, declining health in the American population has increased the acuity of many patients who may suffer from hypertension, obesity, psychological, or behavioral issues, all of which require a greater amount—and increased frequency—of attention by nurses. Management can also cancel shifts, leaving the remaining nurses to work harder with the decreased staffing levels.

The conditions facing Sharp nurses raise basic political issues. Their struggle is bound up with the broader attack on health care, supported by both Democrats and Republicans, which is aimed at shifting costs onto patients as well as increasing the workload of nurses and other hospital workers.

In California, billions of dollars have been cut from medical services under both Democrats and Republicans. In 2004, Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger slashed two billion dollars in health services, reducing or

eliminating coverage for 110,000 Californians. Following the 2008 economic crisis, thousands of California medical workers lost their jobs due to budget restructuring. Just last year, Jerry Brown and the Democratic Party oversaw a reduction of 10 percent in reimbursements for Medi-Cal, the state-subsidized health insurance program.

As for the Obama administration, its principal domestic initiative, the so-called Affordable Care Act, requires workers to purchase subpar and high-cost health insurance, while encouraging companies to slash their own health care programs.

With the election of Donald Trump and the appointment of long-time opponent of Medicare Tom Price as the head of the Department of Health and Human Services, the ruling class is planning to intensify the attack on the working class, with health care a prime target. Already there are discussions over the privatization of Medicare and major cuts to Medicaid. This will inevitably be accompanied by further attacks on the wages and benefits of nurses, along with an increase in workloads, particularly for hospitals in working-class communities.

Within this context, the unions serve to isolate different struggles of the working class and keep them subordinated to the capitalist two-party system.

The working class must fight back!

To begin this struggle, the SEP urges nurses to vote “no.” No contract can be passed before nurses have enough time to study and discuss what they are being asked to sign their names to!

We urge nurses at Sharp to form rank-and-file committees to organize meetings independently of the union, reach out to health care workers and other sections of the working class, and prepare a serious struggle against the assault on health care and health care workers.



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