Sharp Professional Nurses Network union rams through concessionary contract

Seb Gomez
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Nurses at Sharp Healthcare in San Diego, California voted on Thursday by a margin of 87 percent to accept the new three year contract offered by the Sharp Professional Nurses Network (SPNN) union, an affiliate of the United Nurses Associations of California and the Union of Health Care Professionals (UNAC/UHCP). This decision comes over a week after the SPNN called off a limited, three-day strike which had been approved by 98 percent of the nurses.

The union represents the nearly 5,000 registered nurses at Sharp, the largest health care system in San Diego county providing for over one third of all its health care services. As stated by the union itself upon delivering its 10-day strike notice, "this … will be the largest strike of registered nurses in California this year, and the second largest strike of any kind in the nation (after the Communication Workers of America strike)." Having called off the strike, the union then pushed through a new sellout contract, falsely presenting it to its membership as a "historic" victory.

As a result of the negotiations, Sharp granted the union a closed-shop hiring policy wherein new nurses will be required to pay union dues within 90 days of employment, after which they would have to notify the union within a 5-day window of their intent to withdraw. This is the actual extent of the union's "victory"—one that in reality benefits the union bureaucracy at the expense of its members.

While the union claims that the new policy will address the issue of "recruitment and retention of well-trained and experienced nurses," its only assured outcome will be to secure a new stream of revenue for the bureaucracy in the form of membership dues.

Aside from the collection of the additional revenue stream in the form of regular dues, bringing more nurses into the union is focused on strangling any independent opposition that could break out of the straitjacket of the unions and the Democratic Party.

Nurses, in addition to many other workers in the healthcare industry, have a strong desire to fight the corporate controlled companies that dictate their working conditions and the health of their patients.

UNAC/UHCP is aligned with the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees as well as the AFL-CIO. These unions for decades have worked closely with Democratic officials, and the companies they are ostensibly fighting, in order to lower the social position of the working class they claim to represent.

Many of the legitimate grievances nurses have raised are not addressed in the new contract, such as the increasingly difficult working conditions with additional charting, safety checks, or the training of new nurses while nurses are still expected to tend to the same number of patients, or sometimes more.

Many veteran nurses are concerned about inadequate employer match retirement plans and their retiree medical benefits, yet these issues were not mentioned or changed in the new contract.

In addition to the overwhelming majority of nurses who voted to strike, hundreds of families and supporters in and out of the hospital had expressed support for the their struggle by participating in the various rallies and as seen in numerous comments on the union's Facebook page.

In the face of the militancy of its members, the union's action to suddenly call off the strike less than 24 hours before it was set to begin represents an attempt to disorient the nurses and head off the possibility of a broader struggle.

WSWS reporters intervened during each of the four days of ratification meetings at which the union worked to ram through the concessionary contract. Workers were encouraged to vote at these meetings after receiving a copy of the proposed contract, without an opportunity to independently study this lengthy and complex document.

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Despite union efforts to present the contract as a "historic" win, many nurses the WSWS spoke to were suspicious about the process as well as outraged at the outcome.

Nurses expressed immense frustration over the decision to call off the strike. One of them stated, "We started out in June with 1,200 members and now we have 3,000. We were making signs the night before the scheduled strike and we were angry when they told us it was called off. I've been here a long time and have wanted to see change. We want a better retirement and we were told maybe that could be considered 'next time'—what if we are retiring soon, when is our next time? Currently, we only have a two percent to six percent match on our own contribution, it's not enough."

A nurse employed on a Per Diem basis stated her intention to vote "No" on the contract, telling our reporters, "The raises are uneven, Per Diem nurses only get eight percent in the first year and veteran nurses get less too. Why don't we all get the same raise? The union says one of the main issues is having a closed shop but the issue is more about our wages."

The differences in wage increases based on specialty and seniority is a tactic of "divide and conquer" which pits workers against each other. While a "closed shop" could ostensibly promote a sense of unity and solidarity among workers, in reality the new contract preserves and enforces all sorts of permanent divisions among nurses.

One nurse, who falls into the group who would be benefitting the most from the contract, told the WSWS that, "Nurses are smarter than that. We know what they are doing and that's why I am voting 'No' even though I am one of the people who would benefit the most. It's not fair to the other nurses and at the end of the day, if it's not a win for all of us then it's not a win for any of us."

One nurse who said she was adamantly voting 'No' spoke about the union's effort to secure a "closed shop," where every new hire would be required to join the union, and therefore pay union dues. "I feel like once they got the closed shop, wages went out the window. The whole issue was retention and they didn't even address that."

"I've been a nurse for 10 years, we're among the lowest paid nurses. The nurse turnover was so high. As nurses, it's a labor of love, but that only goes so far, especially in San Diego with the cost of living going up and up.

"Now we have a bunch of new grads in the ER, I don't feel safe. All the older, experienced nurses are leaving to Kaiser Permanente. The money is there for nurses, but it's being wasted on war."

Another nurse commented, "This is complete crap! This is a deal for the unions, not for us… That's what I'm going to tell my coworkers: It's 'Yes' for the Unions, 'No' for the Nurses." She said she was interested in organizing outside the union.

Many of the nurses also expressed concern with their own health insurance plans. One nurse commented, "My own insurance is horrible. I had a surgery that was preapproved and then after the surgery, which cost over $80,000, the insurance company said it wasn't necessary. I had to battle them for over a year and ended up having to pay an extra $1800 out of pocket."

The attack on the health care coverage for workers is coupled with a much broader and ongoing attack on health care system more broadly. Under the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, insurance has been further privatized and families have had to pay exorbitant fees for substandard healthcare plans. Families are forced to purchase plans with high premiums, deductibles, and coinsurance, or pay a fine. In the state of California, Medical reimbursements have recently been cut by Democratic Governor Jerry Brown making it more difficult for patients to be seen outside of the emergency room.

The announcement of the appointment of Tom Price as head of the Department of Health and Human Services, signals furthered attacks to Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security, an effort which has long had bipartisan support. The main intent of Obamacare, the privatization of the healthcare industry at the expense of the working class will be continued and intensified under the next administration, whether or not sections of the law are repealed.

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