

Tufts Medical Center in Boston locks out 1,200 nurses after one-day strike

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At 7:00 a.m. on Thursday the Tufts Medical Center in Boston locked out some 1,200 nurses after they conducted a one-day strike Wednesday. Tufts University police stood at the entrances to the hospital, refusing to allow the nurses in even though they were seeking to return to work.

Passing public transit bus drivers honked their horns in support of the nurses who picketed outside, and nurses from the Mass General, Brigham and Women's, and Newton-Wellesly Hospitals—all part of the larger Partners Healthcare organization—turned out in support. Last summer nearly 2,350 Brigham and Women's nurses voted to approve a walkout, but the Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA) brokered a deal with Mayor Marty Walsh—a Democrat and former Building Trades union official—to accept concessions and prevent a strike.

Prominent Democrats, including US Senator Elizabeth Warren and Representative Stephen Lynch, are once again posturing as friends of nurses, showing up Thursday to serve coffee, muffins and pizza and hold a rally. The predicament nurses face—understaffing, attacks on their wages, health benefits and pensions—is largely the outcome of the Obama administration's attack on health care, which is now being accelerated by Trump.

The striking nurses will not be paid during the five-day lockout. Nonetheless, one told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “We’re not backing down. We’re too strong.”

Nurses at the Tufts Medical Center, who often work 16-hour double shifts without a chance to sit down or stretch, have been without a contract since April 2016. Their pay is often \$8-\$12 per hour lower than that of nurses in Partners HealthCare hospitals. Partners is much larger than the Wellforce Health System to which

Tufts belongs and can therefore negotiate higher reimbursement rates with insurance companies in a system that puts revenues before the health of the working class.

The frenzy for insurance and hospital revenues will become more feverish after the announcement today that Mount Auburn Hospital, Lahey Health, Beth Israel Deaconess, and some smaller hospitals are forming their own health system.

The Tufts nurses are fighting for better wages and against management attacks on their pension and sick time benefits. The WSWS spoke with Kathy, Anne, Eileen and Chris who are Tufts operating room nurses with decades of experience. They responded in unison that, even while fighting for their own rights, they consider short staffing and the resulting threats to patient safety to be the most pressing issue. Particularly since Tufts joined the Wellforce network in 2014, the volume of ICU and operating room patients has increased dramatically while staffing levels have stayed the same.

Anne said, “We do it all the time: work 16, 17 hours, come back and work another 10, 12 the next day.”

The trauma unit and operating rooms at Tufts are so overbooked now that patients are sometimes routed to the endoscopy room. Kathy said, “There’s not enough of us to provide the correct, safe care.”

She continued, “Where we strive for excellence, and we always have, now it’s almost like we’re settling for mediocrity. Not nurses, but the hospital.”

Anne agreed, adding, “It’s all quantity and not quality. After 30 years, you can’t change your nursing practice to just get by.”

According to the nurses interviewed, ambulances are not bringing trauma patients to Tufts Medical Center during the lockout. Given that Tufts has a Level 1

trauma unit, management's brutality is putting lives at risk.

Other Tufts Medical Center workers such as scrub technicians are supporting the strike. Management has already forced sick-time cuts on the technicians similar to those it is planning for nurses.

The technicians, who are not unionized, have not been locked out. Nonetheless, according to Anne their support is part of "what gave us the strength to come out this time."

Tufts Medical Center, Wellforce, and the larger Massachusetts Health & Hospital Association (MHA) to which they belong are seeking to make an example of the Tufts nurses as they prepare further attacks on the rights of health care workers.

According to Anne, "We have the feeling, just by their actions, that they had every intention of forcing us into a strike." Kathy agreed, saying, "They wanted to see us go."

The MHA, an employer organization, which according to its web site represents 78 hospitals, is providing money for the strikebreakers, said the nurses. Calling the national companies that recruit and farm out scab nurses "sketchy," Kathy and Anne pointed out the obvious fact that decades of operating room experience cannot be replaced overnight.

Calling Wednesday's one-day strike "irresponsible" and "unfortunate," the MHA issued a statement threatening that "the targeted action will ultimately harm the nurses themselves and cost millions that will be drawn from the funding the hospital had available for nurses' wage increases."

These threats against the livelihood of nurses give the lie to claims that Massachusetts' 2006 health insurance law—a prelude to Obamacare which included an individual insurance mandate—provides "health care for all."

Even while crying poor, Tufts Health Care has hired PR firms and a real estate manager as it seeks to expand its campus. Its CEO, Dr. Michael Wagner, made nearly \$1.1 million in 2015 while eight of its trustees raked in at least \$500,000 each, according to its Form 990 filing.

According to masslive.com, Wagner said on Tuesday, "There is no more money." Wellforce's revenues are approximately \$1.6 billion per year.

Ellen Zane, Wagner's predecessor as Tufts CEO and a current member of the Tufts and Wellforce boards,

boasted to *Boston Magazine* in 2011 that after the 2006 law she "quickly realized that her nimble midsize company could outmaneuver Partners in this new value-driven healthcare economy... under her watch, Tufts doctors have been paid 20 to sometimes 40 percent less than Partners doctors."

As for the nurses, Anne told the WWSW with the raises management wants to give, "It will take four or five years before we get to where other nurses are now."

The limited strikes called by the MNA and its promotion of the Democrats can only lead nurses to a dead end. There is widespread support for struggle for the right to high-quality and free health care. This social right will not be won through impotent appeals to Bernie Sanders and the Democrats, but only through an industrial and political counter-offensive by the working class to break the grip of the corporate and financial elite over every aspect of life, including life itself.



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