Hospital workers go on strike in Rhode Island

John Marion
25 July 2018

More than 2,400 nurses, mental health workers, technicians and therapists at Rhode Island Hospital and its associated Hasbro Children's Hospital have gone on strike this week, with hundreds picketing the hospital in Providence. Workers called the strike after rejecting a new contract by vote last week, along with demands made by management in a federal mediating session on Monday morning.

The workers are striking against attacks on their raises, pensions and working conditions. The three-year contract that recently expired guaranteed 3.5 percent yearly step increases for each worker. These steps cover the first 10 years of a worker's tenure, and no additional cost of living increase has been given to them for the last eight years.

In the recent negotiations, management sought to "restructure"—that is, weaken—the steps, with raises as low as 2.25 percent per year over a four-year contract.

A striking nurse told WPRO, "I'm doing everybody else's job with very little resources, poor equipment, and the people are getting sicker and sicker. I'm incapable of doing my job, at this point, safely."

Lifespan is a hospital group composed of Rhode Island Hospital and four others, including the Brown University medical school. RIH by itself is the fourth largest employer in the state, and Lifespan, with 17,000 workers, is the largest.

On Monday Lifespan's director of public relations boasted that the system is worth $2.2 billion, then complained to the press that last year it "showed an operating income of only $14.6 million." The organization is paying $10 million to Huffmaster Strike Services to provide scabs during the strike. If this amount were paid out to the 2,400 striking workers, each would receive more than $4,000.

The previous three-year contract, which contained a no strike-no lockout clause, expired on June 30.

A Frequently Asked Questions document on the website of United Nurses and Allied Professionals Local 5098, which represents the workers, dodges the question of a strike fund, claiming that it would require extra dues. Instead, it advises members to borrow money from their Fidelity retirement accounts or "notify your creditors that you may have difficulty paying some bills in the event of a strike. Reassure them that you will continue to do your best to pay them."

Picketing nurses were pictured holding signs that read "Patients Before Profits." Like many "not-for-profits," Lifespan avoids taxes but pays its executives handsomely. Rhode Island Hospital had revenues of nearly $1.3 billion in 2016, up 5 percent from the year before. Its president took home nearly $800,000 in salary and other compensation that year, and the executive vice president made more than $1.65 million.

The strike was scheduled to last from 3 p.m. Monday to 3 p.m. Thursday. Management is then planning a one-day lockout because it signed a four-day contract with the scab company.

While the union weakened the strike from the beginning by setting a three-day limit, management and the state's government were far better prepared. On Monday the *Providence Journal* wrote, "in the basement of the Department of Health, officials gathered Monday morning in an impromptu command center as if preparing for a major storm."

In fact, the Rhode Island Department of Health began issuing nursing licenses to scabs as early as June 1 in preparation for the strike. Dr. Nicole Alexander Scott, Director of RIDOH, told the press: "We have evaluated and seen that the nurses that are brought in are experienced nurses. This is a company that deals with strike management, so there is reassurance."

That company, Huffmaster Strike Services, boasts on its wesite, "Huffmaster can assist with all aspects of pre-strike contingency planning and, if a work stoppage

© World Socialist Web Site

occurs, we can provide replacement workers, strike trained uniformed officers, and a full array of supporting services.”

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site