

Joliet, Illinois nurses remain determined as union moves to end strike

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Striking nurses at AMITA Health Saint Joseph Medical Center in Joliet, Illinois continued their brave struggle against the nominally nonprofit Catholic and Adventist health care system on Monday. On Saturday, 720 nurses who are members of the Illinois Nurses Association (INA) carried out their first strike in over 25 years to demand adequate staffing, decent pay and benefits. They are also demanding an end to management intimidation and overwork brought on by staffing cuts in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nurses voted by an overwhelming 558 to 53 to authorize the strike against one of the largest health systems in Illinois, which takes in nearly \$4 billion in patient revenue from 19 hospitals and 230 care facilities. According to the INA, one hundred percent of the nurses on strike voted to continue after the first day, despite ninety-degree temperatures, the use of strikebreakers and hostility from management.

Saint Joseph Medical Center nurses have immense support from broad sections of the working class. Workers and supporters across the state have declared their support for the nurses' struggle, including solidarity posts from fellow health care workers, firefighters, and more.

The INA has kept striking nurses in the dark about a new contract proposal from AMITA after it was announced Monday afternoon. According to the *Herald News*, an INA lead negotiator stated that the proposal would not be available to members until Monday night, noting that it would likely leave the strike "unresolved."

From the outset, AMITA proposed a three-year wage freeze at current pay levels with a \$500 bonus for full-time workers and \$250 for part-time workers. AMITA had since retracted the wage freeze, but nurses continued with their decision to strike. The INA

originally countered with a demand for annual wage increases of 2 percent, 3.5 percent and 3.5 percent, barely above the rate of inflation. Instead of a sufficient guarantee of paid time off, the INA is only requesting an extended illness bank for current nurses and new hires that would allow them to receive pay for illnesses and injuries that extend beyond four days.

Any deal achieved on the basis of the union's policy of isolating the strike, appealing to corporate management and state and local Democrats, cannot be anything more than a sellout, entirely acceptable to AMITA management. There is no way to wrench any concessions out of this giant company without mobilizing the broadest sections of the working class through the city, the state and beyond.

As it has been carried out thus far, the strike has had little impact on the hospital chain. AMITA has reportedly paid over \$1 million to transport and house scab nurses in local hotels to keep the hospitals running and revenue flowing during the strike. Nurses can be seen shouting down the strikebreakers in videos on Facebook on the picket lines, guarded by police in order to allow the strikebreakers through.

As one supporter wrote: "The AMITA hospital is willing to spend 1,000,000 on travel nurses for over 5 days and will not give you raise!! That is the message you need to get out to the general public. This is a hospital that could care less about its patients when they cannot take care of their own nurses!"

There is every possibility to expand this struggle. But nurses must take the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the INA by electing a rank-and-file strike committee. Joliet is seething with class tensions creating the real possibility to break the union's isolation of the striking nurses and unite ever broader sections of the working class. Calls for resignation of

Joliet Mayor Bob O'Dekirk, a former police officer in the city, erupted after he was filmed assaulting a protester on June 1 during the protests against police violence that took place in the city, part of the broad protest movement of workers and youth worldwide.

Largely due to the unaffordable housing costs in Chicago, over the last two decades the population of Will County, like the other counties surrounding Chicago, has grown substantially—by more than one third for Will. It has become a logistics and transportation center with an Amazon facility. In 2017, nine percent of Joliet residents lived below the poverty level, compared to 7.4 percent in the county as a whole.

To mobilize this potential support it is critical to review the role of the unions in creating the social and economic devastation in the city. In June 2019, Caterpillar, the global construction and heavy equipment giant, closed its Joliet plant permanently after laying off hundreds of workers. The downsizing was facilitated by the United Auto Workers (UAW), the United Steelworkers (USW) and the International Association of Machinists (IAM), which sabotaged all resistance by CAT workers. In 2012, the IAM betrayed a long and bitter three-and-a-half-month strike of more than 750 Joliet workers, preparing the way for the plant's closure.

As the Joliet nurses strike started, 500 nurses at Riverside Community Hospital in California were sent back to work Monday after a ten-day strike against HCA Healthcare over unsafe conditions and understaffing. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 121RN sent Riverside nurses back to work without attaining any of their demands.

The Joliet nurses' strike is unfolding in a new period of class struggle brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nurses in Zimbabwe have gone on strike for the second time this year, and doctors in Sierra Leone have struck to demand bonus pay and an end to the government's misuse of funds for the coronavirus response. In Brazil, health care professionals have been engaged in an indefinite strike since June to demand a 40 percent hazard bonus and adequate personal protective equipment (PPE).

Hospitals and health care systems around the world are cutting pay and benefits for workers, furloughing staff due to slowdowns in other procedures and forcing workers in intensive care units (ICUs) to take on unsafe

patient loads and working hours as they reach capacity because of the influx of patients admitted with the deadly COVID-19 disease.

The treatment of nurses and health care workers worldwide reveals the way the corporate elites truly view them, as expendable, rather than as "heroes". There is more than enough money in the corporate coffers of the ruling elite to meet the demands of the health care workers. In the US, the Department of Health and Human Services gave out \$72 billion in grants since April to some of the wealthiest hospitals and other health care providers through the misnamed CARES Act bailouts.



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