SEIU and Illinois Nurses Association announce tentative agreements with University of Illinois at Chicago

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The Illinois Nurses Association (INA) union and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73 announced Thursday that they had reached tentative agreements with the University of Illinois, saying votes on the deals would take place next week.

Simultaneous with its announcement and without releasing the details of the proposed contract, SEIU 73 shut down the 10-day strike by 4,000 service, clerical, technical and professional workers at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and University of Illinois medical centers in Chicago, Peoria, and Rockford. INA had previously ended the strike of some 800 nurses at UI Hospital in Chicago Saturday, having limited the walkout in advance to just one week.

Although neither the university, SEIU or INA have disclosed the full contents of the deals, what little information that has been shared indicates that they will be austerity contracts which satisfy none of workers basic demands for substantial wage increases, adequate staffing and the necessary personal protective equipment and measures to protect workers from COVID-19. Over 200 nurses contracted COVID-19 at the University of Illinois hospital and at least 2 nurses have died so far.

When the INA shut down the nurses strike last week, the union claimed the hospital would bring on an additional 200 nurses to address the dangerous staffing shortages in the midst of a pandemic. The terms of the deal announced yesterday provide that only 160 nurses will be added to a hospital staff of 1,400 nurses, a majority of whom voted to strike.

UIC and UI Hospital administration lauded the contracts in a statement Thursday, writing, “The tentative agreements are the result of extensive discussions and negotiations by all parties and a commitment to reaching fair and fiscally responsible contracts.” In the language of the financial elite and Democratic Party operatives who run the university board of trustees, “fiscally responsible” means nothing more than the continuation of poverty wages and miserable working conditions.

SEIU Local 73 declared UIC workers “victorious” in its official statement yesterday. The union also proclaimed it had “won” on social media with Local SEIU officials flanked by representatives of various trade unions, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), DSA-aligned aldermen and other Democratic Party politicians.

In the midst of the victory rally conducted by the Democratic Party and the unions, workers questioned what had been won. One noted on the SEIU’s Facebook livestream, “We still have not gotten the details on what we won.” She added, “no disrespect but everyone could not watch live. We’re currently at work. It needs to be in writing and sent to us in an email. Another worker sarcastically remarked, “They are too busy celebrating to tell us…”

Alicia, a service worker at the hospital, told the WSWS, “The union should have told us something if they had a contract. I got a text close to 11 PM Wednesday night saying that the strike was over and to go to work in the morning.”

“For me, this makes no sense because we haven’t even seen the contract,” Alicia added. “People don't know how much they are going to get paid. Every contract that we get a raise, something else goes up. The health care went up, the parking lot went up. Everything goes up.”

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According to the “highlights” of the tentative agreement posted on the SEIU 73 website the union claimed it had won $15 per hour minimum wage for building services workers, along with vague assurances of pay increases for all workers, a purported PPE commitment by Illinois Democratic Governor J.B. Pritkzer and claims to protect staff from COVID-19. The union did not indicate when exactly the $15 per hour minimum wage would be implemented in the life of the four-year contract. Whenever it goes into effect, however, the new wage would still keep university workers mired in poverty and in a day-to-day struggle to survive.

Workers who spoke to the WSWS said that even an $18 an hour job was inadequate to meet the cost of living in a city like Chicago, as the SEIU starved workers out without strike pay, offering an insulting “hardship fund” to workers who met the criteria. If the workers' pay had kept up with the productivity levels, the average minimum wage would be at $24 an hour today, according to a study by economist Dean Baker. The stagnation of workers wages was part of a social counterrevolution led by both corporate controlled parties with the aid of the trade unions.

When the nearly 5,000 health care workers and staff began their strike, they were pitted in direct conflict with the Democratic Party, including Governor Pritzker, a billionaire with $3.4 billion in wealth extracted from the exploitation of hotel workers. Pritzker heads the UIC Board of Trustees, which constitutes the nexus of the Democratic Party and corporate interests arrayed against the UIC workers.

The strike by nearly 5,000 in Chicago won broad support among workers in the city and region and among students on campus, despite the efforts of the corporate press to largely black out reports of the walkouts. Both the city’s Democratic Party political establishment and their trade union adjuncts viewed the strikes with growing anxiety, fearful of their potential to spark a much broader movement of workers and young people, against social inequality and exposure to the coronavirus pandemic, particularly in the midst of the explosive political crisis growing in the weeks leading up to the US elections.

Both the INA and SEIU sought to limit the impact of the strikes and isolate workers, with INA limiting the strike to just seven days in advance and ending the walkout before a deal was even reached, after forcing some 500 of its members to cross the picket lines, pointing to the court injunction filed by the university to keep critical care nurses on the job. SEIU 73, for its part, kept 25,000 workers, who were also in the local, on the job at university campuses at schools throughout Chicago.

Nurses and university workers must reject the attempts by INA and the SEIU to ram through a sellout agreement negotiated behind their backs. Workers should move to organize rank-and-file committees and demand a week to study the full contracts and all associated documents.

For nurses and university workers to secure their needs the struggle must be broadened, and an appeal made to teachers, autoworkers, logistics workers, students and others to unite in a fight for decent working conditions and protection from the pandemic.

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