

Service workers at University of Illinois hospital vote on contract after nurses union pushes through sellout

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The Illinois Nurses Association (INA) last week announced the ratification of a new contract covering 1,400 nurses throughout the University of Illinois Hospital system. The passage of the deal came less than two weeks after the INA ended a week-long strike of 800 nurses at the UI hospital in Chicago, forcing them back to work on September 19 without a contract or any guarantee of protection from COVID-19.

The nurses' strike is one of many courageous actions taken by health care workers throughout the US and internationally since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019. More than 3,000 nurses, housekeepers, technicians and food service workers employed by Alameda Health are set to strike at three hospitals in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The INA called for a limited seven-day strike, starting on September 12, following a near-unanimous strike vote. Only 800 nurses took up pickets because of a restraining order, which blocked 525 nurses from striking. The legal action was initiated by the 13-member board of University of Illinois Trustees, led by Illinois Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker, which hypocritically claimed these nurses were needed to provide critical care, even though nurses were fighting over chronic understaffing, which threatens patients, as well as health care workers.

Nurses were on strike simultaneously with 4,000 service workers at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) who are members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73. Throughout the strike, both unions worked to isolate the workers from one another and the wider working class in Chicago and more broadly. This included striking graduate students at the University of Michigan and protesting student workers at the University of Iowa who were fighting unsafe reopening of schools. The SEIU shut down the 10-day strike on September 24, imposing enormous pressure on nurses to accept whatever deal the INA brought back. Service workers are now voting on the deal, which does little to address unsafe conditions and the poverty wages they are paid.

According to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the union said the "agreement was approved by an overwhelming majority, 842-13, of those voting." If in fact that was the case, it had

more to do with the lack of confidence that the union would obtain anything more if nurses resumed the strike. The INA put no viable strategy forward to mobilize broader sections of the working class, which nurses sensed would be needed to beat back the intransigence of the billionaire governor. Nurses knew they would be isolated if they resumed their strike because the SEIU had already sent its members at the Chicago hospital back to work.

None of the demands of the nurses, for safe staff-to-patient ratios, adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) and an end to wage cuts, have been adequately met. Nurses have been sent back into one of the nation's largest urban medical centers in a county where over 5,200 people have already died from COVID-19 and the virus continues to spread. Over 200 nurses at the hospital have contracted COVID-19 and two have died since the pandemic began.

The final contract varies little from the one initially offered by UIH. Nurses will receive raises below the rate of inflation in a city with one of the highest costs of living in the country. Nurses will get raises of 1 percent the first year, 1.5 percent the second year, 1.75 percent the third year, and 2 percent in the fourth year of the contract.

The hospital adamantly opposed the nurses demands for safe staffing levels. Instead of hiring 200 new nurses that the INA promised to negotiate—itsself not enough to meet the demand for safe patient-to-nurse ratios—the union settled for a promise to hire the "equivalent of 160 full-time nurses."

The agreement also reportedly includes a "commitment to redesign the hospital's airflow system and other structural improvements." Promises and commitments, though, are not guarantees. Even the "guaranteed" provision of personal protective equipment is ambiguous.

Predictably, Michael Zenn, CEO of University of Illinois Hospital & Clinics, hailed the deal.

The latest betrayal by the INA follows the concessions contract, which it rammed through for 723 nurses who struck against the AMITA St. Joseph's Health Medical center in Joliet, Illinois in July. The sellout contract was initially rejected by the nurses but was pushed through again.

Voting on the contract reached by the SEIU began last Thursday for the 4,000 cashiers, custodians, parking attendants, laboratory animal caretakers, emergency medical technicians and physical therapists who joined the nurses on strike.

The union says that UIC workers in Chicago will now make at least the city's minimum wage of \$15 per hour—a paltry amount when it takes a wage of at least \$27.83 an hour to raise two children and stay out of poverty in Chicago. Like the INA deal, raises are below the rate of inflation—2 percent, 1 percent, 1.5 percent and 1.5 percent. As of this writing, no vote tallies have been released.

There is considerable opposition to the sellout deal.

A UIC worker, who wished to remain anonymous, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “I was on strike and it was all BS. I lost more money on strike than what they gave us. Their main focus was the \$15 minimum wage and nothing else.

“Nothing was discussed as far as nurse techs. They have not fought for patient-to-tech ratio. We basically got pennies for a raise.” When asked if she could afford to live in Chicago, she said, “No we can’t. People are forced to live in poverty.”

Another worker, after watching video from the SEIU hailing the “victory,” commented, “We got nothing... 6% for four years—that’s not a victory, it’s embarrassing.”

The SEIU kept workers on the picket lines for 10 days without strike pay. After nearly one week, the union announced a bogus “hardship fund,” which according to its website, provided “eligible workers” up to “a maximum of \$250 per week and \$550 in total or until all funds have been disbursed.” Workers could not even apply for these benefits until September 28.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time, “This is part of a deliberate plan by the union to force workers to accept a concessions deal through economic blackmail.”

Like the United Auto Workers and other unions, the SEIU long ago abandoned any of the basic defensive functions previously associated with the unions. Instead it operates as a labor contractor providing low-wage workers for nursing homes, hospitals, health care facilities, hotels, universities, retail stores and other workplaces across the US. Throughout the course of the pandemic, it has isolated nursing home workers in Illinois, the workers at UIC, and now Allina health care workers in Minnesota from one another. Like the Democratic Party, with which it is closely aligned, the SEIU executives fear nothing more than an upheaval of workers that could seriously threaten the profit interests of the major corporations and financial interests which back these institutions.

In exchange for their services, SEIU officials are paid handsomely compared to the low-wage workers they supposedly represent. SEIU International President Mary Kay Henry was compensated a total of \$289,994 in 2019, placing her well within the top 5 percent of society by income.

Throughout the strike and its aftermath in the sellout, the

SEIU and its supporters in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left organizations have done everything to prevent a direct confrontation with the Democratic Party, even though workers were engaged in a conflict with the austerity measures of Governor Pritzker and the Democratic Party-dominated university board. Instead the SEIU and DSA have promoted the racist politics of the Democratic Party, framing the strike not as a struggle against capitalism and its two political parties, but of “black and brown” workers against “systemic racism.”

In announcing the sellout agreement, Local 73 President Dian Palmer, said “I am so proud of the Black and Brown women who led this strike, who convinced their co-workers striking was worth the risk.” In fact, workers of all backgrounds went on strike in solidarity with one another as a class against the exploitation by the university and its corporate and political backers.

Throughout the struggle the *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party have called on nurses and service workers to break through the isolation imposed by the unions and Democratic Party through the building of independent rank-and-file safety committees to take their struggle into their own hands.

Such committees must have as their aim the linking up with workers and students throughout the state and US to prepare for general strike against the murderous back-to-school and back-to-work campaign by the Trump administration, which has the full support of the Democrats. This industrial mobilization must be combined with a political struggle to end for-profit medicine and establish a socialist system of health care. Only in this way can the right to free, high-quality health care be guaranteed to all, along with a good standard of living and the best safety measures possible for all health care workers.

If you are a nurse or worker in the health care system, contact us to learn how you can become a part of this fight today.



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