

Build independent rank-and-file safety committees!

Southern California nurses to strike for health and safety of patients and workers

Kevin Martinez, Evelyn Rios
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Some 2,450 nurses and licensed health care professionals represented by SEIU Local 121RN plan to strike on Christmas Eve in Southern California. The planned strike comes after a 92 percent vote to authorize strike action last Friday at three Southern California hospitals in Riverside, Los Angeles and Thousand Oaks.

Workers are striking against the unsafe conditions and the lack of preparedness by hospitals. Nationwide, over 1,700 healthcare workers have died during the pandemic, according to a union report from September. Hospital staff report suffering from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and frequently compare their conditions to a warzone.

The 92 percent strike authorization, involving occupational therapists and other licensed health care professionals, shows the overwhelming desire by these workers to fight against poor conditions. This is part of a broader fightback by nurses, from New York and Illinois to California. This is also an international phenomenon, with health care workers in Chile and across the world fighting for their own lives as well as that of society as a whole.

The strike could see thousands of nurses walk out for 10 days beginning on Christmas Eve. Hospital officials are threatening that any work stoppage at the Riverside facility could force them to send patients under critical care to hospitals in the Coachella Valley, which is already straining under the weight of existing patients fighting coronavirus and other ailments.

Riverside County's available ICU beds dropped to zero on Monday, and the entire Southern California region has only 2.7 percent capacity remaining. On Sunday, the California Department of Public Health

allowed mandated nurse-to-patient ratios, which are set to provide a standard of care, to be waived for intensive care units, emergency medical services and medical and surgical units.

Health care workers on social media say they are already at the breaking point. One wrote: "ICU STAFF ARE BURNT OUT. Everywhere in this hospital, staff are burnt out. The ICU department will lose more staff if they are not getting their regular breaks ... Now, you are putting the additional idea of making these COVID patients [endure] a possible 3:1 ratio and team nursing? COVID patients that are manual prone and [need] to be turned every two hours. That takes an average of 3 to 5 nurses to do so, coding one after another, on multiple ... drips (Sedatives, paralytics, vasopressors, heparin drip, bicarb drip), and now. ... The ICU nurse is expected to overlook 4 ICU patients according to the new team nursing model sent out by management on their RN license? [I am] beyond out of words."

Another health care worker from Long Beach Memorial Hospital said: "Anyone that comes in to be a breaker on the Covid unit works incredibly hard. It's nonstop. Management told those nurses they would not get Covid 50 [a pay incentive]. So once again ... the nurses on the Covid unit probably went all night again without breaks. I'm truly not sure how much longer the nurses can take this. It's horrible to see these patients suffering. The patients and nurses deserve better than this."

Another nurse said: "For way too many days our staff has been unable to leave their patients' bedside because they are unstable to walk away from and no one can cover them. This means no eating, drinking, or peeing for 12.5 hours. This goes beyond ADO [assignment

despite objection]. This is inhumane. I hear whispers that some staff tried to come in for this incentive pay and the incentive was revoked. Your icu staff has no one tonight. Shame on upper management for allowing this.”

Both management and the Democratic Party are already blackguarding nurses for going on strike, blaming them for patient deaths, rather than the criminal and reckless reopenings of schools and workplaces which have produced mass infections and death, combined with severe staff shortages.

Bruce Barton, director of Riverside County’s Emergency Management department, told the media that a strike “would have a massive, massive impact on our system. ... If that facility closed, there would be a huge, detrimental impact on the public. I’m afraid, sir, we would lose lives.” He added, “We will have to send patients to all the other hospitals that are already overwhelmed. We’ll have to send them across the border to San Bernardino County to their hospitals that are already at close to capacity.”

In reality, nurses are striking against the understaffing and shortages which have already made mass death a grim reality. Rather than expanding medical care for all those in need and hiring more staff to alleviate the pressure, the health care industry has laid off staff and closed hospitals while collecting billions in bailout money through the CARES Act.

Los Angeles officials are pushing for Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom to sign an executive order preventing nurses from striking. Linda Evans, mayor of La Quinta, told the media, “Any impact on shutting down ... services at a major institution like (Riverside Community Hospital) is going to just tidal wave the rest of us.” She said, “If we have approximately 2,000 nurses that walk off the job and abandon patients for whatever reason, it’s unconscionable during this type of surge and strike, and we need to put a little pressure to allow those not to occur during a time of crisis.”

What is in fact “unconscionable” is that the ruling class has deliberately allowed mass deaths to occur by reopening schools and nonessential businesses, in spite of repeated warnings by public health experts and the experiences in the spring, where lockdowns saved tens of thousands of lives. The purpose of the forced reopenings is to keep profits flowing in order to prop up the massive rise in stock prices which has funneled

trillions of dollars into the pockets of wealthy.

The trade unions, including SEIU Local 121RN, are working overtime with hospital management and state officials to push through a backroom deal to either prevent a strike from occurring at all or to force nurses back on the job with none of their demands having been met.

To oppose the unions’ preparation for a sellout, health care workers must begin building their own independent rank-and-file safety committees which they control, independent of and in opposition to the unions.

Workers must draw the vital conclusion that they must organize independently of the trade unions and the two big business parties. Contact the wsws.org today to begin building a rank-and-file committee in your hospital and area.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact