Reject the SEIU sellout: Mobilize the working class to defend HCA nurses in southern California!

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With the pandemic spreading out of control and California hospitals strained beyond capacity by the flood of nearly 20,000 COVID-19 patients, including at least 3,500 in ICUs, nurses in Southern California have taken a stand to demand safe staffing levels and protections that are critical to save the lives of health care workers and patients alike.

Nurses at Los Robles Regional Medical Center in Thousand Oaks, Riverside Community Hospital, and West Hills Hospital and Medical Center voted by 92 percent last week to take strike action, beginning on Christmas Eve. In an act of blatant disloyalty, however, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 121RN has moved to stop the strike and push through an employer-backed contract without providing workers with the full agreement.

On Wednesday afternoon, SEIU Local 121RN e-mailed a link to members to vote on the deal even though they have only been given the union's self-serving "highlights," not the actual contract. The official vote is not expected to take place until December 28–29.

Well aware that the release of the full details of this miserable contract would provoke enormous opposition from rank-and-file nurses, SEIU officials are concealing the information for the sole purpose of preventing the strike. This is because the SEIU officials fear such a strike would garner broad support from health care workers and broader sections of workers and evolve into a battle not only against the HCA bosses but Governor Gavin Newsom and Democrats who back the corporations.

A review of the few details that have been released makes it clear that the SEIU is trying to buy off nurses with a few pennies, including a $1,000 signing bonus. In exchange for this blood money, the SEIU has completely dropped nurses' central demands over patient-to-nurse ratios, adequate testing and personal protective equipment (PPE), safe quarantine policies and other protections. For nurses, these issues are not soundbites for SEIU officials, but matters of life and death for health care workers, not only in Southern California but across the US and the world.

Nurses should reject the SEIU's effort to ram this deal down their throats. They should demand a full week to study and discuss the full contract, not the "highlights," before any ratification vote. Nurses from San Francisco to Sacramento and Los Angeles to San Diego are battling on the frontlines and the attempts by the unions to try to block unified and joint action must be defeated.

The nurses' demands can and must be won. To fight for this, however, a new strategy and way forward is needed.

First of all, nurses cannot wage this battle alone. That is why they must set up a rank-and-file strike committee, made up of the most militant workers elected at all three hospitals, to reach out to the millions of manufacturing, transportation and warehouse, educational, agricultural, shipyard, health care and social assistance workers in Southern California to prepare joint action to demand the resources needed to fight the pandemic.

In every workplace, rank-and-file committees, independent of the corporatist unions, should be set up to prepare a political general strike to shut down all nonessential business and schools and demand full compensation for workers and relief for small businesses. This would immediately relieve the massive pressure on the hospitals and health care workers.

These impossible conditions led to the silent protest by Riverside Community Hospital (RCH) nurses in May, a wildcat strike in July and the overwhelming mandate to strike. Nurses have responded to the SEIU's sellout agreement with anger, noting that accepting a settlement

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limited to pay and bonuses, as pathetic as it is, would only strengthen management's slanderous efforts to paint nurses as selfish and uncaring, even though HCA CEO Samuel Hazen pocketed $27 million last year, nearly 500 times higher than HCA's median employee compensation of $50,012 annually.

As one RCH nurse told the *World Socialist Web Site Health Care Workers Newsletter*: "I thought we were striking for patient safety. I am voting 'no' because this contract won't solve anything we have been calling for."

While nurses have been fighting to save every patient, the sole concern for the hospital system has been profits. HCA Healthcare, which received more than $6 billion in government handouts, has been engaged in a ruthless cost-cutting campaign, aimed at ridding the hospitals of more-experienced nurses and creating a workforce of largely low-paid temps. Over the last year, there has been an exodus of nurses at RCH after management eliminated the critical position of charge nurse.

Nurses have dedicated their whole lives to patient care and are sick and tired of seeing their patients die in droves and experiencing the daily carnage in their hospitals. But this struggle cannot be won on a limited trade union basis; it is a political struggle that pits the interests of the working class against the capitalist profit system and both corporate-controlled parties.

The for-profit health care system has proven to be a complete failure in the face of its greatest test in a century. While tens of thousands of frontline health workers across the country have been infected and nearly 2,000 have died due to the lack of preparation and years of cost-cutting, the world's billionaires who invest in the health care industry saw their wealth jump by 36.3 percent or $150 billion between April 7 and July 31 alone.

From the beginning of the pandemic, the Democrats and Republicans have been concerned not with protecting lives but protecting corporate profits. After bailing out Wall Street and the major corporations in the bipartisan CARES Act, the Trump administration and Democrats and Republicans on the state and local levels launched the campaign to reopen workplaces and schools to get workers to pay for the corporate bailout. The current catastrophe is the product of their homicidal "herd immunity" policy of letting the virus to rip through the population to keep profits flowing no matter what the strain on the health care system and loss of life.

In Los Angeles County and throughout Southern California, ICUs are reporting zero percent capacity, forcing hospitals to ration care and medical staff to make the excruciating decision of who will receive life-saving treatment and who won't. Last week, the state activated its "mass fatality" program, for use when deaths surpass levels that can be handled by local coroners and emergency personnel. Governor Gavin Newsom has ordered over 60 refrigeration trucks and tens of thousands of body bags.

On Tuesday, President-elect Joe Biden said the "darkest days in the battle against COVID are ahead of us, not behind us," reiterating his declaration earlier this month that another 250,000 Americans will die in the coming weeks and months. But Biden, like Governor Newsom, has rejected emergency measures to save lives, above all the shutdown of nonessential industries and schools, which have been the major spreaders of the deadly disease.

But that is exactly what must be done until vaccines are widely available, and the population is inoculated. The Socialist Equality Party calls on nurses to reject the SEIU's sellout agreement and build a rank-and-file strike committee to spearhead the fight for a political general strike throughout Southern California and beyond to save lives. This must be combined with the political struggle, based on a socialist perspective, for a radical redistribution of wealth.

The trillions handed over to the banks must be reallocated to address the public health and social crisis, including the hiring of tens of thousands of health care workers and the guaranteeing of both good working conditions and living wages. The personal fortunes of the pandemic profiteers—Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, John H. Tyson—must be expropriated and used to save lives. At the same time, the for-profit health care system must be replaced with a system of socialized medicine to guarantee access to high-quality care for all and good pay and working conditions for health care workers.

We urge HCA nurses to take up this fight by contacting the Socialist Equality Party today and signing up for the WSWS *Health Care Workers Newsletter*.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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