

# Union pushes through contract to avert strike of Hawaii nurses

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Hawaii Nurses Association (HNA) forced through a tentative contract agreement at the Kapiolani Medical Center for Women and Children in Honolulu, averting a strike after nurses overwhelmingly voted to authorize one earlier this month. The HNA is affiliated with the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) as HNA-OPEIU Local 50.

Despite its lower infection rates than the US mainland, COVID-19 infection rates in Hawaii have been on the rise, with total infections increasing by 29 percent since the beginning of December. On Monday, Hawaii health officials reported they were adding 60 previously unreported deaths to the COVID-19 death toll. The official count has not yet been updated to reflect these additions, which place deaths at 399. Officials said the deaths occurred between August through December, 51 from Oahu, six on Hawaii and three on Maui.

The number of reported cases stands at 25,093 out of a total population of 1.4 million. All indications point to the state being on the verge of a major outbreak, as the virus' effective reproduction rate in Hawaii is 1.09, meaning that every positive person is infecting 1.09 others. This important indicator, compiled by rt.live, is the highest of any state in the union.

According to OPEIU Local 50, the tentative agreement has now been ratified but the exact vote has not been made public. However, the official "highlights" of the contract do nothing to address the issues of unsafe staffing or the nurses' central demand for management to provide a new N95 mask each shift. According to the highlights, the contract also includes a pay increase of 7 percent over 3 years, which will be substantially eaten up by inflation, estimated by the state government to be between 1.6 and 2.3 percent for the next "few years."

OPEIU Local 50 President Daniel Ross was even compelled to acknowledge the miserly character of the agreement, declaring, "we cannot in good conscience celebrate this milestone knowing there are other glaring deficiencies in the hospital."

The main demands of the nurses during the strike negotiations were centered on protecting the safety of medical workers and patients. Nurses and health care staff have been fighting against the cost saving policies of Kapiolani to reuse N95 masks by way of multiple UV light cleanings, and they have demanded an end to shifts where they are required to care for both COVID and non-COVID patients, a practice which greatly increases the risk of infection.

The typical cost of a single N95 mask is around \$1, although price-gouging has increased costs up to \$7. The CEO of Kapiolani, Martha Smith, has argued that they are re-using masks according to the CDC guidelines—guidelines that were put in place to be used under a severe shortage of PPE. Meanwhile, management is blaming the nurses for contracting COVID-19 and for not properly wearing PPE.

Smith cited the loss of \$21 million in revenue due to the pandemic as the reason for such cost-cutting measures. However, the 2019 tax records of the ostensibly non-profit Hawaii Pacific Health show that Smith drew a salary of \$774,689 as CEO of Kapiolani. The top 10 executives of Hawaii Pacific made a total \$8.5 million during the same year.

Shannon Damo, a respiratory therapist at Kapiolani, explained to Honolulu's *Star Advertiser*, "they've been cutting us to a bare minimum. We're working with a skeleton crew. It's almost borderline unsafe. We work in all areas of the hospital just like a nurse, but there are not as many of us." The reductions in hospital staff were described as "scary." Respiratory therapy "is one

of the most susceptible occupations to catching COVID because COVID is a respiratory virus.”

Added to the threat facing the hospital systems are the abysmally low numbers of ICU beds and equipment. In Maui, with a population of 167,417, 15 out of a total of 31 ICU beds are currently occupied and eight out of 38 ventilators are in use. These meager health resources could easily be overwhelmed in the event of a major outbreak on the small island.

The health care unions throughout the United States have been working overtime to try to contain the growth of working class opposition. Nothing has been resolved for nurses at Kapiolani or throughout Hawaii, which is on the precipice of disaster. Nurses in Southern California also had a strike called off at the last minute late last year when SEIU Local 121RN pushed through a contract that nurses were not even given a chance to read prior to voting.

The role of the trade unions, working with hospital, local and state officials, is to prevent the independent action of workers and keep them isolated. OPEIU Local 50 President Daniel Ross told Hawaii Public Radio earlier this month, “I don’t want to see a strike happen. It’s not going to be good for anybody.” Ross pointed to the no-strike and no-picket clauses already written into the existing contracts that in effect cripple any coordinated effort.

Advocating his support for the backroom deal, Ross said, “After about 12 hours of mediation today a tentative agreement was reached. We feel this is a fair agreement and will be talking to the members for a ratification vote next week.” Ross insisted that the PPE shortage and constant reuse is a “minor” issue.

Throughout the pandemic, the ruling class has sought to downplay the dangers in Hawaii. *Time* magazine in November reported approvingly that Hawaii “only” reported 113 new cases on November 23, after a high of 200 in July. Such rosy depictions of the virus in Hawaii paved the way for the government to relax restrictions, allowing the virus to spread more rapidly. Starting December 28, travelers to Hawaii no longer had to quarantine themselves if they provided a negative COVID-19 test.

Meanwhile Hawaii Governor David Ige and the Democratic Party-controlled state legislature are pushing forward towards reopening schools, as part of a broader effort to reopen the economy as a whole. The

decision to reopen schools to in-person learning has been farmed out to individual islands, with the state government providing only recommendations based on certain thresholds. However, even the state guidelines allow for partial reopenings for elementary schools with as many as 15.4 daily new cases per 100,000 residents.

The betrayal by the HNA-OPEIU demonstrates the need for nurses to form new organizations to take the initiative out of the hands of the union. The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* are helping workers throughout the world to build rank-and-file safety committees to oppose the union-enforced isolation and to link up the struggles of workers in different workplaces in opposition to the policy of “herd immunity” of the ruling class.



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