

Union ends health care strike in Bend, Oregon

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The Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals (OFNHP) Local 5017 ended the strike of 156 health care workers at St. Charles Medical Center in Bend, Oregon on March 15. The workers, who had picketed for 11 days, were forced back to the hospital by the OFNHP, which ended the strike without meeting a single one of the workers' demands or even securing a contract.

The union breathlessly announced on its Facebook page that "we are happy to say that our strike is over." A joint press release by the hospital and Local 5017 officials said: "The agreement [to end the strike] came together as both parties believe patient care is and should be the top priority." Representatives from the union and the St. Charles Medical Center are working with a federal mediator to impose a contract, supposedly to be finalized by March 31, on the workers.

In September 2019, workers voted 90-34 to accept representation from the OFNHP, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The workers, who include technology specialists who work with X-ray, ultrasound, CAT scan and other diagnostic technologies, struck to win their first labor agreement with the hospital. They demanded improved compensation, including multiyear wage formulas with guaranteed cost-of-living increases, as well as more reasonable workloads.

Frank DeWolf, a St. Charles Bend catheterization lab technologist, told "OregonLive" and Oregon Public Broadcast (OPB), "Bend has become one of the most expensive cities in Oregon to live. When the wages don't go up to match, it's making it very hard to live here. Our salary is lower than our counterparts in Western Oregon. Our salaries are lower across the board."

This was the first strike at St. Charles since a nurses strike in 1980. The walkout was preceded by years of

legal struggles by workers seeking to recover losses from what amounts to be wage theft. St. Charles has a history of underpaying workers. In 2017, the hospital settled a \$9.5 million suit brought by Carol Lynn Giles, an RN, in 2013 over failing to reimburse her and other hourly nurses and respiratory therapists for mandatory training.

According to Wikipedia, the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries received 11 complaints from workers at the health care system regarding wage violations, with 10 of the complaints prompting warning letters from the bureau to the health care company. In 2020, the health care system admitted to violating state laws regarding meal and rest breaks.

Throughout the strike, the administration maintained that the hospital was running normally, but several physicians and nurses told the press that patient care was being undermined by untrained strikebreakers, which the union allowed the hospital to bring in. A neurosurgeon, Dr. Priscilla Pang, told OPB it was difficult to conduct surgeries as "There are only two technicians that even know how to use the equipment I was going to use for the case. And frankly, I didn't feel safe with a bunch of temps coming in."

A *BendSource* article, which the union shared on its Facebook page, mentions that the parties agreed to end the strike on March 12. On the same day, the union re-promoted a GoFundMe campaign created on March 1 to raise \$40,000 to help pay for a striking worker's living expenses.

Local 5017, an offshoot of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) which despite having assets and investments totaling \$120 million, paid out zero dollars in strike benefits in 2020, according to the union's filing with the US Department of Labor. At the same time, AFT President Randi Weingarten was paid \$453,453.

On March 11, the union showed its real class position

by promoting Democratic Senator Ron Wyden as an ally of the medical workers. The senator, a trusted servant of the capitalists, in an interview with the *Washington Post*, defended the extended tax cuts for the liquor industry in the COVID-19 relief bill passed by Congress last December as a way to “help small brewers and wineries.”

The senator is as well a virulent advocate of nationalist economic policies. He has taken to YouTube to denounce subsidized Chinese manufacturing as the reason that American workers lose their jobs. According to Wyden, in foreign trade “it isn’t hard to find someone who is cheating” and, of course, it is China.

The union’s fawning over of such full-throated supporters of American nationalism is a stark warning. They choose to conceal from the workers the real reason for job losses and deteriorating living conditions—the ongoing crisis of capitalism—while pitting American workers against Chinese workers, both of whom are oppressed by the capitalist system.

As we warned the striking workers last week, the union wanted to end the strike as quickly as possible and fast-track a rotten deal with the hospital. Our warning was based on similar maneuvers undertaken by unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in particular, throughout the country. Unable to contain the opposition from the workers who voted 94 percent to authorize a strike, Local 5017 called the walkout not to fight for workers’ demands but to isolate and demoralize them into accepting the hospital’s demands.

But this struggle is far from over. With an expected spring surge of COVID-19, the lives and working conditions of the workers are in great danger. The policy of social murder conducted by the American ruling class, allowing the virus to spread with little restraint throughout the population, has resulted in over 30 million infections and over 548,000 deaths, including 2,324 deaths in Oregon, a state with a population of 4.2 million.

Additionally, Oregon has reported 17 cases of the more virulent B.1.1.7 variant, first identified in the UK, as well as one case of the P.1 variant prevalent in Brazil. Disturbingly, the state has just identified an apparently new variant, containing characteristics of both the UK and Brazil variants. Against scientific advice, the Biden administration is conniving with the

trade unions to restart in-person schooling across the country, ignoring a large body of scientific evidence that reopening schools is a major driver of the spread of COVID-19.

To win their demands, the workers must organize their opposition to the hospital administration outside of the control of the unions, which are tied to the Democratic Party and will do everything possible to help the Biden administration return to business as usual, with schools open, hospitals full and Wall Street booming.

To carry the struggle forward, health care workers in Bend and across the Pacific Northwest should form rank-and-file safety committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves and independent of the Democrats, Republicans and unions. Educators, who are the natural allies of health care workers, have already formed rank-and-file committees in Oregon and many other states.

By standing up against inadequate wages, unsafe staffing levels and working conditions, Bend health care workers are standing up for quality patient care. Similarly, by standing up for keeping learning remote, educators are fighting to give health care workers breathing space amid a raging pandemic.

Unlike the unions, which keep workers’ struggles divided, the purpose of rank-and-file committees is to unite workers as much as possible, across health care, education, transportation, manufacturing, logistics, retail and other sectors, to prepare collective action.

Containing the pandemic will require the preparation of a general strike to shut down schools and nonessential workplaces, with full compensation for all affected workers and small business owners. Workers must demand the resources needed to vaccinate the population, address the critical social needs of poor and working class families, and provide high quality remote learning until the pandemic is under control.



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