

UFCW Local 1445 announces deal to avert a strike, isolating striking nurses in Worcester, Massachusetts

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On March 19, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1445 ratified an agreement with Tenet Healthcare, the owner of St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts. The deal averts a strike by its 600 members, less than a week after they joined nurses already striking at the hospital in an informational picket.

Like the nurses, who have been on strike since March 8, the workers in the UFCW were protesting unsafe working conditions. In a for-profit system that places a primacy on cost-cutting and profits for shareholders, health care workers, including personal care assistants, housekeepers, pulmonary technicians, operating room aides, and secretaries, are consistently understaffed.

In one instance, a personal care assistant (PCA) at St. Vincent Hospital was tasked with caring for 23 patients, making adequate care impossible. In a video posted to Facebook by UFCW Local 1445, a PCA who works with postpartum patients described normal conditions as “we’re always by ourselves” and having upward of 20 patients at a time. When asked if this was safe, she responded without hesitation: “absolutely not.”

The struggle by St. Vincent nurses is vitally important for the working class. Hailed as “heroes,” health care workers have been taken for granted by a capitalist system that squeezes them for profit, risking their lives and the lives of their patients. In their open-ended strike, the nurses of St. Vincent Hospital are articulating the sentiments of countless nurses across the country and the world.

Health care workers represented by the UFCW Local 1445 are overworked and underpaid, but the deal reached does little to address their main grievance. All

told, 35 new positions will be created for patients that need one-to-one care. These positions do not resolve the staffing crisis facing technicians who care for the general population. The new contract does not guarantee staffing ratios or pay increases, and it defers the resolution of workers’ concerns to newly formed corporatist committees composed of hospital administrators and union bureaucrats.

Management has celebrated the agreement, calling it a “testament to the collaborative relationship between our hospital and the UFCW.” The same statement touts a “mutual respect clause” in the contract to “ensure everyone will treat each other with respect and dignity at all times.”

However, it is the collaborative relationship between the UFCW and the profit-motivated health care conglomerate that is responsible for the undignified conditions health care workers and patients of St. Vincent Hospital face on a daily basis.

The union bureaucracy itself has revealed its complacency and resignation to corporate dictates. Gabe Camacho, political director of Local 1445, explained, “did we get everything we wanted? No, but that’s the nature of these things.” The “nature of these things” is that Tenet Healthcare is only able to accrue hundreds of millions in profit on a yearly basis—and St. Vincent Hospital is its most profitable facility—because it does not face meaningful opposition.

Throughout the pandemic, the UFCW has played a critical role in enforcing unsafe working conditions that have led directly to workers’ deaths, particularly in the meatpacking industry. In Waterloo, Iowa, where Tyson Foods managers bet on how many of its employees would contract COVID-19, UFCW Local 431

collaborated with management to implement attendance bonuses of \$500 even as workers were contracting the illness.

In Rochelle, Illinois, three days after the Rochelle Foods meatpacking plant shut down due to an outbreak of the novel coronavirus among workers there, UFCW Local 1546 praised measures taken by the company to prevent infections, including a bonus to encourage workers to remain on the job.

Most recently, UFCW Local 401 refused to defend meatpackers at an Olymel plant in Red Deer, Alberta, Canada, where at least 515 of 1,850 low-wage workers have been infected since mid-November. Despite occasionally militant-sounding rhetoric, President Thomas Hesse and the UFCW have instead only called for a public inquiry by the Alberta legislature.

For its part, the Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA), which covers the approximately 700 striking nurses of St. Vincent Hospital, it is no less oriented to the capitalist for-profit system. When medical-surgical nurses at St. Vincent and across the state began pushing the union for practical measures to combat insufficient and inadequate personal protective equipment and unsafe conditions, union policy was to institute a system of filing safety reports with corporate management.

Submitting such paperwork is an onerous task for nurses already swamped by unsafe assignment levels, duties for which they aren't trained, and terribly sick patients. Even so, nurses at St. Vincent filed more than 600 reports. Over this period, several negotiating sessions, in the presence of a federal mediator, failed to result in an agreement that would ensure worker and patient safety. When the vote to authorize the strike was finally put before the membership of the MNA bargaining unit on February 10, it passed by an 89 percent majority.

In spite of having been authorized by an overwhelming majority of its membership, the union is doing everything it can to isolate the strike from the working class in the region. To date, only nurses from one other hospital have joined the nurses on the picket line. The MNA represents 23,000 nurses in Massachusetts and is the largest nurses' union in the state.

State Democrats, while feigning support for the strikers, have worked behind the scenes to prevent a

strike from breaking out in the first place. Indeed, before the strike was called, a letter signed by Senator Elizabeth Warren, Senator Edward Markey, and Representative Jim McGovern implored both sides to come to an agreement so that a strike could be averted.

Like the bipartisan support for the unionization of Amazon workers in Bessemer, Alabama, the Democratic politicians' "support" for the MNA nurses in Worcester is aimed at channeling working class anger into bourgeois political channels where it will ultimately be subordinated to the dictates of financial capital.

Good health care must be driven by rational policies based on science. That begins with the scientifically backed struggle for mandated ratios, and it ends with the socialist transformation of society.

The task facing the working class is the formation of politically independent rank-and-file committees to pursue policies based on social need and to counter the murderous for-profit policies of capitalism.

The health care workers of St. Vincent Hospital can carry forward their fight by forming rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the MNA and UFCW bureaucracies. To find out more, visit wsws.org/workers.



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