

Massachusetts nurses reject offer from Tenet Healthcare as US strike movement grows

Our reporters
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More than 700 nurses who have been on strike at St. Vincent's Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts, for nearly two months have overwhelmingly rejected the latest contract proposal by the multinational hospital giant Tenet Healthcare. The nurses walked out over unsafe staffing levels, demanding a one-to-four nurse-to-patient ratio on medical/surgical floors and telemetry units, as well as increased staffing in the emergency department and ancillary support in each unit.

The deal, which was nearly identical to the previous offer that the nurses rejected, was presented to striking workers by the Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA) on Monday. The only difference was Tenet's proposal to set up a toothless committee to "review" the issue of staffing ratios on a quarterly basis.

Even after manning the picket lines with no strike pay for more than seven weeks, nurses overwhelmingly rejected the deal. David Schildmeier, MNA director of public communications, told the *Worcester Telegram* that on Monday afternoon the union presented it to the striking nurses via Zoom and their "reaction was quite negative. ... They were saying words I can't repeat. They were all yelling at once on the Zoom, 'No, no!'" He added, "They were devastated, angry and insulted." The MNA did not, however, say why it brought this insulting offer back to nurses.

The defiant stand by St. Vincent's nurses is indicative of the growing mood of militancy among workers in the US. On Monday, 2,000 graduate student workers at New York University walked out on strike to demand higher wages and better health care and childcare. Also, on Monday, steelworkers at Allegheny Technologies Inc., on strike since March 30, overwhelmingly rejected management's demands for wage and health care givebacks. More than 1,100 coal miners at Warrior Met Coal in Brookwood, Alabama, are continuing their month-long strike after rejecting a deal brought back by the United Mine Workers by a vote of 1,006 to 45. More than 3,000 Volvo Truck workers are also on strike in Virginia.

In addition, ExxonMobil has threatened to lock out 650 oil workers at its Beaumont, Texas, refinery and hire strikebreakers if the United Steelworkers is unable to get workers to accept its contract demands by May 1. Also in May, 131,000 rural letter carriers for the US Post Office and 100,000 public sector workers in New York City face contract expirations.

The pandemic, which has seen nearly 600,000 Americans die and untold social misery for tens of millions, has been a bonanza for the super-rich. The stock market, CEO pay, corporate profits and the fortunes of the billionaires have all skyrocketed. In every case, however, the workers who have risked their lives during the pandemic are being told there is no money to pay decent wages or ensure safe conditions.

Last April, Tenet received billions from the bipartisan CARES Act, including more than \$1 billion in stimulus funds and a \$1.5 billion Medicare advance. Shortly afterwards, the company furloughed more than 11,000 workers and suspended a retirement benefit for its employees. Tenet's CEO, Ronald Rittenmeyer, raked in \$16.7 million in 2020.

The St. Vincent's strike is the most important health care struggle now going on in the US. It is an indisputable fact that nurse-to-patient ratios determine outcomes for patients and that these ratios are a matter of life and death for health care workers and patients alike.

While many nurses and other workers have joined the picket line of the St. Vincent strikers, the MNA has isolated their struggle by refusing to call out the 23,000 members of the union across the state on strike. The chief concern of the MNA and the AFL-CIO is to prevent the strike from developing into a direct confrontation with the Democratic Party and the Biden administration.

The MNA is not paying any strike benefits to workers and instead requires them to go through the humiliating process of demonstrating financial need to access the union's ad hoc relief fund for assistance. Instead of providing strike pay, the union has organized crowdfunding to pay for diapers, formula and other basic needs for nurses and their families.

On Saturday, a WSWs reporter asked the MNA's spokesperson Schildmeier why the union has not been paying strike pay to the nurses despite the fact that workers pay monthly dues that total as much as \$1,000 per member annually. Schildmeier replied that the nurses knowingly gave away strike pay when they became a part of the MNA because the provision of strike pay is not in the union's bylaws approved in 2000. Schildmeier also confirmed that there are several MNA bargaining units that have remained on the job without a contract even as St Vincent nurses walk the picket line, yet there has been no effort made to call out any of these units.

In a demonstration of the incestuous nature of the corporatist trade unions, before becoming MNA communications head Schildmeier was the director of public relations and marketing for Tenet Healthcare (formerly National Medical Enterprises) from 1986 to 1988.

On March 19, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1445 prevented a strike by 600 staff members at St. Vincent's when they announced an agreement with Tenet Healthcare. Before the UFCW pulled the rug out from underneath these workers to block a joint strike, staff members joined the nurses on the picket lines to express their solidarity.

In an attempt to intimidate the striking nurses, Tenet Healthcare has erected two security towers to monitor the nurses and hospital entrances. The corporation also hires out Worcester City police at a rate of \$30,000 per day to monitor the striking nurses and disrupt the picket. By the MNA's calculations, Tenet has so far spent \$40 million on strikebreaking replacement nurses, internal security, and the aforementioned police measures.

A review of the operations of Tenet Healthcare exposes the criminality that runs rampant throughout Corporate America. Over the last two decades, Tenet has accumulated a staggering 45 regulatory and legal violations. Sixteen of these charges involve reporting false claims to the government and related charges, two charges involve kickbacks and bribery, 13 involve the gross abuse of its employees, one involves investor protection violation, and numerous other crimes.

Throughout the early 1990s Tenet Healthcare, then National Medical Enterprises, admitted thousands of psychiatric patients to hospitals who did not need hospitalization for the sake of charging patients inflated prices. In 1991, the corporation was investigated for fraud and conspiracy with law enforcement officers raiding company offices to gather evidence proving that patients and insurance companies were being defrauded. In 1994, 20 National Medical Enterprises offices were raided by the federal government. The result was fraud charges amounting

to \$380 million.

A book titled *Coronary: A True Story of Medicine Gone Awry*, by Stephen Klaidman, exposed a scheme by the health care giant that involved performing unnecessary surgeries on 769 patients, solely for profit. From 2014 to 2017, Tenet Healthcare hospitals knowingly implanted unnecessary cardiac monitors in patients during invasive surgeries, putting patients needlessly in peril. None of these crimes prevented Tenet from reaching 174 on the Fortune 500 in 2020.

There is no doubt that top executives at Tenet Healthcare have successfully calculated that criminality is the most profitable business strategy. On July 24, 2019, Tenet announced it would separate itself from Conifer Health Solutions to become a publicly traded company. The investor-owned corporation currently has assets of \$23.35 billion.

The ongoing Worcester nurses' strike comes after decades of abuse at the hands of Tenet Healthcare. The corporation has a long record of systematically eliminating workers' breaks and mealtimes. Employees who actively cooperate or turn a blind eye to these criminal schemes have been rewarded handsomely through kickbacks and bribery.

There is a growing wave of struggles by nurses and other health care workers who were praised as "heroes" last year only to face layoffs and ruthless cost-cutting now. Last week, 84 health care workers began a strike at a hospital near Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania, outside Scranton.

Striking nurses' resounding rejection of Tenet's latest "offer" demonstrates their determination to fight. They should reject the MNA's collaboration with Tenet Healthcare and its efforts to isolate their struggle and form a rank-and-file strike and negotiating committee to expand their struggle. We urge St. Vincent's nurses to support the International Committee of the Fourth International's call to establish the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and attend the international online May Day rally this Saturday, which will discuss the program and perspective of the IWA-RFC.



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