

Nurses in Everett, Washington authorize strike for better pay, benefits and more staff

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On June 2, registered nurses (RNs) at two Providence Medical Center facilities in Everett, Washington voted to authorize a strike if an agreement is not reached between the hospital administration and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union. Official vote tallies were not publicly released. UFCW Local 21 represents 1,700 nurses at the hospital.

Hospital administration is attempting to cut pay as well as health and paid leave benefits. Nurses are fighting to receive fair compensation for their hard and hazardous work over the past year of the pandemic and believe a better contract will help increase staffing amid the loss of employees due to COVID-related burnout.

As of June 16, there have been 410,195 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Washington state, with 24,930 hospitalizations, and 5,810 deaths. The state's reopening on June 30 is likely to cause a new surge of infections with the rise of the rapidly-spreading Delta variant.

Providence Medical Center treated the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the United States in January 2020, and has seen thousands of sick patients since. Nurse Julie Bynum told King 5 News, "It's taken a toll, emotionally. There's been a lot of death. I've seen a lot of death."

"It has been a year and a half of this and still counting," nurse Kimball Conlon told reporters, "The stress is wearing us down. It takes us longer to recover from events that normally we'd be able to process and set aside. I know I don't feel like I can be there enough for my patients and coworkers, sometimes."

Health care workers across the United States and internationally have suffered record levels of stress caring for patients amid the pandemic without adequate staff, supplies and support. A study of over 1,000 healthcare workers conducted by Mental Health

America (MHA) showed that 93 percent of health care workers were experiencing stress, 86 percent reported experiencing anxiety, 76 percent reported exhaustion and burnout, and 75 percent said they were overwhelmed as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. More than 3,600 U.S. health care workers have died of COVID-19 in the first year of the pandemic, according to "Lost on the Frontline," a 12-month investigation by The Guardian and KHN to track such deaths.

With Providence nurses working under a contract that expired over eight months ago, negotiations are still underway and UFCW Local 21 has not yet set a strike date. The union has indicated that the administration is unwilling to increase pay and benefits to be on par with surrounding hospital systems, where the same chronic staffing and workplace issues exist.

There are still at least three more bargaining sessions scheduled in June and the union is legally required to give a 10-day notice to the hospital before calling a strike. There is every indication that the UFCW is intent on reaching an accommodation with management, sacrificing nurses' basic demands, in order to prevent a major struggle from breaking out. This has been the role of the UFCW throughout the course of the pandemic. It has blocked action by grocery workers, meatpackers as well as health care workers against stressful and unsafe workplace conditions under the pandemic. In Washington, Local 21 has blocked strike action by 27,000 grocery workers, 22,000 health care workers and 1,400 retail workers across the state, refusing to mobilize united action against the deadly policies of the corporations.

However, the potential exists for nurses at Providence Medical Center, part of the third-largest nonprofit healthcare system in the U.S., to win support from fellow health care workers, as well as teachers, grocery

and food workers, and the broader working class. Providence nurses must reach out as well to the 700 nurses at St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts, who have been on strike for over four months as well as other striking workers such as the Volvo Truck autoworkers in Virginia and Warrior Met coal miners in Alabama.

Millions of health care workers in the US and globally want to fight for decent compensation and safe working conditions. This fight will not be waged by the unions or the establishment political parties. It requires the building of independent rank-and-file committees democratically controlled by workers themselves. This is the only successful way forward to overcome the sabotage of their struggle by the UFCW, the Washington AFL-CIO, and the entire trade union apparatus, which is tied by a million threads to the Democratic Party and corporations.



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