

Two-day strike by 1,400 Los Angeles nurses over patient safety

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1,400 registered nurses at the University of Southern California (USC) Kenneth Norris Jr. Cancer Hospital and Keck Hospital of USC took part in a two-day strike Tuesday and Wednesday in Los Angeles to demand safe conditions for staff and patients.

Hundreds of nurses picketed Tuesday outside the USC Medical Center, a world-renowned research hospital. However, after an early morning rally on Wednesday, the nurses union, the California Nurses Association/National Nurses Organizing Committee (CNA/NNOC), sent nurses home for a “break” and told them to join a noon “virtual rally,” before coming back at 7 p.m. Wednesday night when few patients, students, and community members would see their pickets.

A striking nurse who wished to remain anonymous described working conditions to the *World Socialist Web Site*. “We provide care to some of the sickest patients in the nation. As such, the nurses at Keck are highly specialized and highly trained. They are experts in their respective areas. For over a decade, Keck administration has refused to properly staff our hospital. They are completely reliant upon us working overtime and 18-hour shifts.

“We are tired of feeling forced to work 18 hours so our patients can get the care they deserve. We are tired of being begged daily to come in and work extra shifts. We are exhausted. We are chronically understaffed and are tired of seeing our patients suffer. Lifesaving therapies are being ‘paused’ because we don’t have enough staff to operate the devices on a given shift, expecting a nurse to care for 2 patients that are so sick they actually require 1:1 nursing care, etc.

“Additionally, we have an unacceptable amount of temporary workers staffing our units. There are times when a unit will be staffed with more than 75 percent temporary nurses. This places an undue burden upon the regular staff there. Patients come to Keck from all over the country to receive world-class care.

‘Beyond these staffing issues, our OR nurses are tired of being forced to come to work sleep deprived after working

18-20 hours. They currently only get 8 hours from the end of their on-call shift to the start of their next regular shift. Once you factor in the 15-20 minutes it takes to get to their car plus the commute in LA traffic, that often leaves them with less than 5 hours at home, after working 20 hours. This is completely unacceptable and a clear concern for the safety of our patients. We are only asking for an additional 2 hours of rest time between shifts.

“USC stated at the start of these negotiations that they wanted to redefine their relationship with their nurses. What they failed to realize is that our nurses are fed up and tired of being taken for granted. We are no longer going to sit back and take it while we are used and abused by this employer.”

The reality which USC nurses face is the reality across the country. The American Nurses Association predicts that by 2022, there will be more unfilled jobs available for registered nurses than for any other profession.

Nurse Hernandez told the *Los Angeles Times*, “I get a call every week from my unit saying: ‘Please, can someone work; we’re short staffed,’” adding that if additional help wasn’t found, nurses are expected to “double up on ratios or downgrade a patient” to a lower level of care.

While the union limited the strike action to only two days, management is locking out the nurses until Sunday, or for twice as long as the strike itself. Management claims this is due to the length of contracts for outside nurses.

Despite the fact that nurses have been locked out, effectively punishing them for striking with four days of lost wages, the CNA has made clear that it will no longer hold daytime pickets for the duration of the lockout.

Wednesday’s “virtual rally” on the NNU’s Facebook page was addressed by NNU executive director Bonnie Castillo and Kathy Kennedy, president of the California Nurses Association. Outside of the empty phrases and despite their large numbers, the union is working to isolate their struggle both from the surrounding community and from nurses around the country who are fighting against the exact same issues. The CNA/NNOC is under the umbrella of National Nurses United (NNU), the largest organization of

registered nurses in the US, with 175,000 members across the country.

The dull remarks of Castillo and Kennedy were counterposed to the pleas by a few frontline nurses, one of which cited the 1912 strike by textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts who organized a fight against slave-like conditions.

The strike at USC is part of a growing wave of struggles by workers in general, and health care workers in particular. Earlier this month, nurses and other public sector workers in the Chicago area went out on strike for two weeks to protest inadequate staffing. In Worcester, Massachusetts, nurses at St. Vincent hospital have been on strike for four months. Earlier this year, a threatened nationwide strike by nursing home workers in Connecticut was averted at the last minute by a deal brokered by the state governor and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which promptly called the strike off.

In all of these cases, nurses and other workers have confronted not only management, but the unions, which have worked to limit strikes and isolate them from one other. Worcester nurses, for example, have been left on the picket with no strike pay, and the Massachusetts Nurses Association has not lifted a finger to oppose the hospital's hiring of permanent replacements. The SEIU in Chicago called off the strike without even reaching a tentative agreement, much less one which had been voted on and approved by the membership.

In California, one of the states worst-affected by the coronavirus pandemic, the unions have worked to limit strikes by Alameda County hospital workers, Burlingame nursing home workers and nurses at Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital. In the fall of 2019, only months before the pandemic began, the unions called off a statewide strike at the Kaiser Permanente hospital chain before it even began.

The unions are tied by a million threads to the Democratic Party and the administration of Governor Gavin Newsom, the very forces who are responsible for the austerity conditions which nurses face in the richest state in the US.

Liz, a registered nurse in Long Beach, went to Keck Hospital on Wednesday afternoon to support the striking nurses, but found empty sidewalks. A former CNA member herself, she recorded a live video explaining the isolation of the nurses by their union, "I came out to support the strike, I guess they were here early this morning and they are now gone for the day. What kind of union does that to their nurses, to their workers? Why would you send your nurses home to come back at a later time?"

"I am not really surprised they tamp down on nurse opposition. They keep nurses under control. They make deals with hospitals, corporations, CEOs to prevent them

from holding a real strike. This campus is spending a lot of money. I can't believe what I am seeing, obviously they have the money and don't want to spend it on patient care.... They should be out here letting the residents of the area and the patients know what is happening. When I worked for a CNA hospital, they always told us we couldn't strike, that there was no support for it. That is what they would always tell us, and it's not true... The CNA did everything they could to tamp down on our opposition.

"I didn't even know about this strike. They probably made a deal with the hospital, saying, 'We'll have the nurses out in the morning for a few hours, and then we'll bring them back later in the evening when nobody can see them out there and we'll do two days of that. KTLA may have come out this morning, but who even knows about it? And now that no one is out on the strike line, who in this area that comes to this hospital would know that this is happening?'"

In order for USC nurses and St. Vincent nurses to win their fight, they must unite together and with health care workers across the country and beyond. They should take the lead of the Volvo autoworkers and build their own rank-and-file committees independent of the corporatist trade unions, who are in bed with the financial elite and orchestrate one-day strikes for them to let off steam as conditions continue to worsen for patients and health care staff. For assistance in setting up a rank and file committee at your hospital, contact the WSWs.



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