

Tentative contract agreement with Providence Medical Center in Everett, Washington leaves nurses facing chronic understaffing

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One and a half months after 1,700 registered nurses voted to authorize a strike to address inadequate staffing and pay issues, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 21 has reached a tentative agreement (TA) with Providence Regional Medical Center facilities in Everett, Washington. The contract vote is set for July 23.

The deal was announced on the local union's website on July 13 along with sketchy highlights. The bargaining committee states that the TA achieved the "protection of benefits, insures affordable healthcare costs, great wages and much more!" Highlights include a \$2,000 "pandemic pay" bonus, a "legacy bonus" for long-term employees, a "total of a 15% wage increase for the life of the contract," down from the 21 percent increase initially demanded by the nurses, "increased education funds," and "strong staffing language." Local 21 has no plans to release the full agreement to the membership, but instead has offered online Zoom sessions where nurses can hear union officials explain the details.

Providence nurses authorized a strike to address chronic work-related stress as a result of severe understaffing, long hours, and the lack of fair compensation. Like health care workers across the United States and world, Providence nurses have experienced a year working under extremely stressful conditions, treating thousands of sick patients during a global pandemic. Nurses want to see their pay increased to a level comparable with surrounding hospital networks, improved benefits and overall conditions in order to attract and retain staff, as well as to reward them for enduring such difficult conditions.

The only reference to staffing issues in the highlights page is the inclusion of the vacuous phrase "strong staffing language." The specific changes to language in the new agreement are not spelled out because the union

knows full well that the issue has not been addressed. Even in terms of wages, the 15 percent increase over five years is not enough to keep up with skyrocketing living costs in Everett and the Seattle metro area, setting aside the question of catch-up pay nurses are owed for years of inadequate wages. The 15 percent represented a climb down by the UFCW from its initial demand for a 21 percent wage increase, itself inadequate.

Furthermore, the highlights left out the status of parking and protection of Extended Illness Bank (EIB) and Paid Time Off (PTO), two demands on which Providence did not budge for months. After nearly a year and a half of working through a global pandemic, eliminating or decreasing EIB/PTO for exhausted nurses is dangerous to both staff and patients.

In line with the corporatist program of the unions, the UFCW will do all it can to convince nurses to accept the deal and not to strike, regardless of how inadequate the terms of the contract are. UFCW Local 21 is the largest local in the national union, covering tens of thousands of grocery, food, retail and health care workers, all of whom have faced health and safety risks, increased workloads and economic hardships during the pandemic. Throughout the pandemic the role of the unions has been to ensure workers stayed on the job while sabotaging all opposition to unsafe conditions.

Instead of actively fighting for workers, Local 21 has engaged in the familiar pattern of letting contracts expire, bargaining behind closed doors, holding strike authorization votes for workers to blow off steam, then soon after announcing a "victory" with a wholly inadequate sellout agreement.

Nurses at Providence Medical Center have been under an expired contract for over eight months and the prior proposed contract offered pay that was below market

wage and aimed to take away sick leave. They have every right to demand that the full agreement be subject to careful review before the vote and if rejected carry forward the strike they had already authorized to win every one of their basic demands.

However, for the UFCW the strike vote was nothing more than a tactical maneuver. As the bargaining committee stated, the modest proposals included in the new agreement “were rejected by Providence until we took a strike authorization vote.” Clearly there never was an intention to fight for workers’ full demands.

Providence nurses are prepared and determined to fight. In carrying forward their struggle, nurses in Everett would receive the sympathy and support of health care workers across the country and internationally who are fed up with conditions that have left them overworked and underpaid.

To win their reasonable demands, workers must break from any illusions in the UFCW and other unions and wage an independent struggle while linking their fight with other sections of workers.

This lesson has been demonstrated in the strike by St. Vincent nurses in Massachusetts who have been out for over three months, one of the longest strikes in the history of the state, without strike pay from the union, which has left them isolated. Despite this, they are determined to bring an end to unsafe nurse-to-patient staffing ratios. Like the UFCW, their union, the Massachusetts Nursing Association, has isolated the struggle, refusing to call on their membership to support and join the nurses in solidarity.

In Los Angeles, nearly 1,400 registered nurses at two local hospitals participated in a two-day strike due to unsafe working conditions that include long shifts, not enough staff and an overreliance on contract nurses. In late June, health care workers in a dozen nursing homes across Pennsylvania voted to go on strike in order to demand “life-saving” changes to the way the facilities are run. According to the Associated Press, deaths in nursing homes increased by 32 percent last year.

The issues in these contract fights raise broader social and political questions. Health care workers are bearing the brunt of the disastrous state of health care, which is the result of decades of capitalist cuts. The pandemic has further exposed the fact that profit-driven systems are not compatible with the safeguarding of public health.

Across the country, health care workers have been struggling for more than 16 months to cope with the pandemic. According to the staffing firm Aya Healthcare, permanent nurse vacancies are up 20 percent compared to

the start of the pandemic. Additionally, a Mental Health America survey found that 93 percent of health care respondents reported experiencing stress, while around 86 percent reported anxiety produced by the sudden overflow of sick patients. Some 77 percent reported feeling frustrated with their working conditions, and a similar percentage experienced physical exhaustion and burnout.

While at the beginning of the pandemic the media floated the narrative that front line health care workers were the heroes of the pandemic, as the pandemic has stretched into a second year the so-called heroes have been virtually abandoned. Health care workers are burnt out and in need of care, including ample paid time off, manageable hours, sufficient pay and adequate staffing and equipment to properly attend to patients.

Throughout the pandemic, governments have callously sacrificed the health and safety of working people to the profit demands of the corporations. With the insistence by the world’s governments on the full reopening of the economy and the elimination of even the most basic safety measures, regardless of rising COVID cases or low vaccination rates, the burden on health care workers is sure to increase.

To carry forward their struggle, health care workers must arm themselves with a socialist program aimed at ending health care for profit. They should not look to the pro-corporate unions to lead this fight but mobilize their own independent strength. To organize a serious fight in defense of living standards, working conditions and patient safety, health care workers must take matters into their own hands by building rank-and-file workplace committees. These committees should democratically draw up demands based on what workers need, not what management says it is willing to accept. They should forge links with health care workers and other sections of workers such as autoworkers and teachers nationally and globally to fight for health care as a social right for all.

If you’re interested in joining the struggle or for more information about forming rank-and-file committees contact the WSWs.



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