

CWA, Catholic Health reach tentative agreement in Buffalo nurses strike

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The Communication Workers of America (CWA) has reached a tentative agreement to end a 35-day strike by 2,200 hospital workers at Catholic Health's Mercy Hospital of Buffalo, New York.

The strike began over low pay and dangerously low levels of staffing amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The CWA is seeking to push through the agreement by Sunday without the membership having the right to consider and discuss, let alone even see the full contract.

Voting began Sunday and will continue through Monday evening. Members are only being given a self-serving summary of the contract in addition to "informational" meetings. The full contract has not been released to the rank-and-file members.

Details that have been released clearly show that the contract does not meet the needs of the striking workers for better wages, safe staffing levels or improved medical benefits.

The CWA is pushing for a yes vote and has closed down the picket lines. In a press release Thursday night, the union pledged to Catholic Health that it will have a full return to work by Wednesday, even before members have seen the contract summary.

CWA District 1 Vice President Dennis Trainor and Area Director Debora Hayes released a statement Thursday night speaking of the agreement in glowing terms, seeking a "yes" vote from the membership.

"We are very pleased with the tentative contract agreement we have reached with Catholic Health System. We have stressed from day one that frontline workers' overriding concerns are sufficient staffing to ensure high-quality patient care, and a compensation package adequate to allow Catholic Health to attract and retain the staff needed to obtain staffing

improvements. This contract achieves those major objectives, with historic breakthroughs in guaranteed safe staffing ratios, substantial across the board wage increases, including bringing all workers above \$15 an hour, and preserving health and retirement plans intact. Hundreds of new workers will be hired under this agreement to remedy dire staffing shortages."

What the union is calling "across the board wage increases" is in fact just a 6.3 percent increase for nurses in the first year of the contract and 8.4 percent for technicians, bringing the abysmally low wages for environmental and other workers to just \$15 an hour.

These will be followed by just 2.0, 2.5 and 2.75 percent raises in the remaining three years of the contract.

While the 6 and 8 percent initial raises may sound substantial, 2021's Consumer Price Index inflation rate has already increased by 5.4 percent and has yet to show signs of slowing down, effectively negating the promised raises.

The meager 2 percent raises for the remainder of the contract would mean workers would most likely be losing money, especially if the historically high rates of inflation continue. Like the contracts used to avert a strike at auto parts maker Dana Inc. and the contract which the United Auto Workers unsuccessfully tried to ram through to end the strike at John Deere, this contract is structured to prey upon workers' financial insecurity with front-loaded wage increases, which would then be substantially eroded by inflation over the rest of the contract.

In regards to staffing levels, the deal would supposedly ensure one worker for every four patients on the medical and surgical floors during the day shifts and at least one worker for every five patients on night shift.

Catholic Health also agreed to hire 250 new employees, a promise they had previously made in a 2016 agreement, which ultimately only lasted for two of the four years of the contract, allowing the system to go back to the same dangerous conditions. Amidst an historic nursing shortage, however, it is unlikely Catholic Health will be able to fill these positions.

Catholic Health does not have to meet the staffing levels until 2023, and even then, the CWA may have once again given the health care system a loophole to get out of this. The summary says that nurses who work extra shifts for coverage will be given a small “bonus payment,” if management has not met the staffing levels.

The agreement comes just days after Catholic Health announced it was suspending health insurance coverage for striking workers, a thuggish move by the system under conditions of a raging pandemic throughout the country and region.

While the CWA had promised to cover workers’ medical expenses, workers should be highly suspect of an agreement that came into fruition after the union was put on the hook for paying medical expenses and feared risking some of its nearly \$600 million in assets.

The four-year proposed agreement must be ratified not only by Mercy Hospital’s workers but also by CWA members at two other Catholic Health facilities, Kenmore Mercy Hospital and St. Joseph’s Hospital.

These are just three of five hospitals, as well as a number of clinics, nursing homes and labs owned by the Catholic Health system, a “nonprofit” providing health care services in Western New York.

While it has members at other Catholic Health facilities, the CWA purposely isolated the strike from workers at other facilities and the growing nurses strikes across the country. In 2016 the CWA bargained away the right to strike at all the facilities with the exception of Mercy Hospital.

While the union is pushing to end the strike, nurses and health care workers at Catholic Health are in a powerful position. There is a growing movement of health care workers throughout the country who continue to sacrifice their lives to work throughout the pandemic and are fighting to demand better staffing and higher wages.

Over 1,000 hospital workers are on strike in Huntington, West Virginia, with tens of thousands of

health care workers at Kaiser Permanente set to strike. Health care workers at Pittsburgh’s enormous University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC) are also threatening to go on strike later this month. This is part of a growing movement of auto workers, teachers, steelworkers and miners across the US and throughout the world.

Rather than rely on the broken promises of the CWA, which is joined at the hip with management and the Democratic Party, workers at Mercy Hospital and throughout the health care industry need to follow the example that has been set by educators, auto workers and steelworkers who have built rank-and-file committees independent of the unions to organize their fight. These committees will work immediately to expand the strike to the other Catholic Health hospitals and facilities and beyond, ending the strike’s isolation.

These committees will formulate a set of demands based upon what workers need and to ensure high-quality care for all the communities they serve and not what Catholic Health claims it can afford.

These demands should include adequate staffing levels to ensure high-quality and safe services, substantial pay increases for all workers, especially the lowest paid and full health care and pension benefits for all employees.



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