

Staff at Springfield, Oregon medical center launch five-day strike

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Over 300 hospital workers struck McKenzie-Willamette Medical Center in Springfield, Oregon on Monday. The workers—certified nursing assistants, MRI technicians, respiratory therapists and pharmacy technicians—are demanding wage increases to match community pay levels, affordable health care, improved protections against the Sars-CoV-2 virus and safe staffing levels, and are opposing the hospital’s plan to outsource 100 jobs—a quarter of the bargaining unit.

Seriously undermining the striking workers, the union, Service Employees International Union Local 49, has limited the length of the strike to five days—until Friday. A two-day strike in early October and a 24-hour strike in mid-November had no impact on management, which is holding firm to its takeaway demands. The union’s web site refers to a “breakdown in negotiations” as the trigger for the five-day strike.

According to the *Register-Guard*, McKenzie-Willamette spokesperson Jana Waterman said that no appointments will be delayed or canceled due to the strike, and operations will continue as normal. She stated that the hospital “will implement our contingency plan, including additional staffing, and hospital operations will continue uninterrupted.” Waterman made clear that the hospital is seeking to break the strike, saying that 30 strikebreakers had been brought in.

Springfield is a working-class town, based on a timber-resource economy until the 1990s, with a population of slightly over 63,000. The city has the distinction of having the most profitable hospital in the state of Oregon, McKenzie-Willamette, which is one of two for-profit hospitals in Oregon.

According to an October 2018 article in *The Lund Report*, “in 2017 McKenzie-Willamette made a profit of just over \$50 million, giving it a 25 percent profit

margin, according to Oregon Health Authority data. The average profit margin at other Oregon hospitals didn’t even reach 7 percent that year.” Median household income in Springfield in 2019 was \$47,695 while for the state of Oregon median household income was \$67,058.

Understaffing is alleged to be a major contributor to the hospital’s profitability. The Oregon Health Authority investigated McKenzie-Willamette in 2018, filing a 49-page complaint that it violated nurse staffing regulations, many of them multiple times.

The Lund Report stated, “The state interviewed nurses, managers and executives. Nurses said that to save money the hospital has cut certified nursing assistants and pushed more work on to nurses, prompting nurses often to work through their required breaks in order to get their jobs done.”

These exploitative conditions have only increased under conditions of nearly two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, where health care workers have been on the front lines of the disaster caused by the refusal of capitalist governments to effectively combat the virus. Nurses across the United States, as well as in the United Kingdom and internationally, report dire working conditions, with long hours and extremely high patient loads. The conditions make it more difficult to provide quality treatment to patients, and they increase workers’ chance of chronic stress, burnout and other mental health issues.

The striking nurses at McKenzie-Willamette experienced horrific scenes in 2020 and 2021, with Lane County being one of the areas in Oregon hardest hit by the virus. According to the *New York Times* data tracker, “Since the beginning of the pandemic, at least 1 in 13 residents have been infected, a total of 30,531 reported cases.” In August, as schools and businesses

were fully reopened, the county saw a record surge in cases, with a seven-day average of over 200 cases per day.

An article in the *Register-Guard* in August of this year reported that amid a sharp escalation in hospitalizations due to COVID-19 infections, McKenzie-Willamette made a request for National Guard support. “There is not much room at the hospital, full stop,” said Dr. Harry Scholtz, an infectious disease doctor at McKenzie-Willamette. “We have most of the ICU beds occupied with the critically ill patients. Most of the step down, intermediate units are full as well, sometimes with patients that would otherwise be in an ICU.”

At the end of October, an 11-year-old COVID patient and local resident had to be transferred from McKenzie-Willamette to Portland's Randall Children's Hospital. The mother, Amy Cholewinski, told KEZI.com, “As much as you trust doctors to tell you what to do, they didn't know what to do.” And though Spencer Cholewinski is out of the hospital, he continues to suffer from the infection. “It's all about building endurance; now he has a hard time breathing, even getting up to go to the bathroom can be a challenge, so he still has a way to go.” said his mother.

The SEIU has said nothing about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the major issues of staffing, wages and mental health. Throughout the past two years, every health care union has collaborated with hospital management to enforce the deadly and exhausting conditions that workers have had to endure. Whenever struggles do break out, the unions have done everything they can to keep them isolated and disconnected from nurses across the country.

The strike of McKenzie-Willamette nurses joins a broader movement of the working class rebelling against the corporations and the unions and fighting for fair compensation and a safe workplace environment. Over 50,000 Kaiser health care workers were set to strike last month across the West Coast over the same basic issues, and they are now voting on a sellout tentative agreement pushed by the Alliance of Health Care Unions (AHCU) at the last hour to avert the strike. The last year has seen strikes by autoworkers, construction workers, food processing workers and other sections of the working class.

These various struggles must be united in a common

fight. Efforts have begun with the Kaiser Workers Rank and File Committee to develop independent organizations through which health care workers can unify their efforts, assert their own demands, and effectively fight for safe hospital conditions, significant wage increases, and an end to the pandemic that has placed strain on the health care system. McKenzie-Willamette nurses must join this movement in order to carry forward their fight and prevent the union from isolating and selling out their struggle. We urge all nurses and health care workers to contact us and get involved.



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