Tentative agreement to end Massachusetts nurses strike after intervention of Biden administration

Ben Oliver
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On Friday, after the intervention by US Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh, it was reported that an agreement has been reached between the Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA) bargaining committee and Tenet Healthcare for an end to the strike by the nurses of Saint Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts. The strike began in March and is the longest nurses strike in the state's history.

While details have not been released, it is being reported that Tenet will allow the striking nurses to return to their previous positions in the hospital. This concession by Tenet is likely the most substantive change to the "last, best and final" offer it put before the MNA bargaining committee in August.

However, in an attack on nurses who have walked the picket line for more than nine months—or been forced to find alternative employment—the MNA bargaining committee has agreed with Tenet's clear intention to retain the scabs it began hiring in May to permanently replace nurses.

Union officials are quick to explain that the deal contains "necessary" compromises. A ratification vote has not been set, but is "expected to take a few weeks," according to Marie Ritacco, bargaining committee member and MNA vice president.

The union has remained quiet on the deal's particulars. It remains undisclosed whether any improvements to staffing, one of the key demands that nurses sought when they walked out on March 8, are included in the contract agreed to by the MNA. If this agreement follows the template of Tenet's "last, best and final" offer, the union will agree to concessions on this central demand for staffing improvements.

The August agreement contained a mix of patient ratios of 4- and 5-to-1 and a dispute process if it were determined that good-faith attempts had not been made by management to meet staffing guidelines. As the WSWS wrote in October, "In other words, if circumstances, such as pandemic surges, result in ratios being exceeded on any of the units without strict agreements, nurses will have to accept conditions as they are."

The demands of the Saint Vincent nurses, like those of countless other health care workers, are informed by their experiences with battling the pandemic, attrition, hostile management and years of caring for an increasingly sicker population.

The tentative agreement, which the MNA leaders are counting on the rank-and-file to ratify, was brokered by the intervention of the Biden administration. Marty Walsh, former mayor of Boston, union president and now Biden's secretary of labor, is being lauded by the union for "graciously" facilitating the dialogue between the two sides.

In fact, by facilitating the agreement, Walsh is fulfilling the role played by Democrats and their allies in the unions in isolating the strike and preventing it from joining the growing international movement of workers who are rejecting the profit-mad dictates of capital. While tens of thousands of health care workers have been mobilizing over the last year for safer working conditions for themselves and their patients, the unions have ushered in one sellout deal after another.

In August, Tenet Healthcare was only able to present its offer without a return-to-work provision for the striking nurses because the MNA, unions nationally and the Democrats had suppressed the strike's

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expansion to other bargaining units and facilities.

In a joint statement on the agreement, Massachusetts Democrats reference an “uptick in cases” in the Worcester area. In Worcester County, the all-time high of 755 for the 7-day moving average of new coronavirus cases was reached on January 21.

When the Delta variant hit earlier in the fall, and the director of UMass Memorial Hospital raised the alarm as its ICU was being overrun, Worcester Mayor Joseph Petty joined Governor Charlie Baker to issue public calls for an end to the strike. That surge came on rapidly and peaked at a 7-day moving average of 350 in September. The recent surge in cases threatens to surpass last winter’s darkest days with the 7-day rate quickly reaching 621 on December 14, after dropping to the recent low of 164 in early November.

Successive waves of COVID-19 have made it nearly impossible for Tenet Healthcare to effectively run St. Vincent Hospital. Health care workers across the US are leaving the profession in droves. According to Becker’s Hospital Review, the health care system has contracted by nearly half a million positions, either through layoffs or resignations.

Tenet Healthcare—which had already begun to downsize its operations at Saint Vincent hospital, forcing patients to seek care well outside of their region due to bed shortages—apparently has been forced to shelve its vindictive attempts at punishing striking nurses by refusing their return to their previous positions at Saint Vincent. That the scabs who were hired to break the strike are being retained speaks to the bankruptcy of the MNA.

The intervention by the Biden administration in the strike is the latest attempt in its ongoing struggle to head off an independent mobilization of workers, which is the only thing that can bring an end to a pandemic that has left millions dead and countless more suffering. As the WSWS has noted many times before, the pandemic will be to the 21st century what WWI was to the 20th—a trigger event for immense historical change.

Saint Vincent nurses should demand that they see the full terms of the negotiated contract and be allowed to carefully review it before voting on the deal. They should oppose any return to work without a vote of the membership. They should also insist that their original demands on staffing are included and that replacement scabs not be allowed to remain on the job.

Saint Vincent nurses should call on the thousands of health care workers in the MNA to rally in their defense with mass protests and strike action to ensure that their demands on staffing and wages are met.

Recent experience at Kaiser Permanente on the West Coast, where despite an overwhelming strike mandate the union alliance was able to ram through a deal with an insulting below-inflation wage offer, demonstrates that the unions have no intention of defending the interests of their membership, but rather work to police them in the interest of the health care conglomerates.

Saint Vincent and all health care workers must organize independently of the unions and their Democratic Party accomplices through forming rank-and-file committees to defend their interests. Only such independent action can mobilize the working class in opposition to the ruling elite’s criminal herd immunity policy.

Contact the WSWS to find out more about the Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic.

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