

Sewage leak at Stanford Health Care as contract expiration date looms for 5,000 Stanford nurses

Beth Salazar
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At Stanford Health Care in Palo Alto, California, last month the pipes in one of the hospital's bone marrow transplant units burst, causing a massive leak of sewage into the unit. This prompted an immediate evacuation of all patients and staff on the unit.

To prepare for a bone marrow transplant patients are given high doses of chemotherapy and/or radiation to kill their existing bone marrow containing malignant blood cells, purposefully weakening the immune system to an extreme degree in order to make it less likely for the patient's body to attack the transplanted bone marrow. In addition, patients are often on immunosuppressant drugs in an attempt to combat a serious condition known as graft vs. host disease in which the donor bone marrow attacks the patient's organs.

Overall, these patients are at an extremely high risk for infection and in many cases even abide by a special diet for several months, avoiding such things as raw fruits, raw vegetables, unpasteurized cheese, raw nuts and more. Needless to say, a deluge of untreated sewage into the unit was a life-threatening event.

This event occurred in Stanford Health Care's older hospital building at 300 Pasteur Drive, which was already slated for significant renovations. It is well known among staff that many portions of the 300 building are in desperate need of renovations. Hospital higher-ups likely knew about the state of the pipes in the bone marrow transplant unit and made decisions to forgo full repair, temporarily losing lucrative beds. The unit now faces months of repair.

At the same time, over 5,000 nurses at both Stanford Hospital and Lucile Packard Children's Hospital face a contract expiration on March 31. Negotiations between

Stanford Hospital and the independent trade union, the Committee for Recognition of Nursing Achievements (CRONA), began in mid-January. CRONA has not yet reported on the sewage incident.

According to Bloomberg Law, Stanford Health Care's contract is just one of over 400 labor agreements—covering at least 207,000 health care workers—that is set to expire this year. This figure will likely grow throughout the year as more companies report their contract expirations to the federal government.

This will have an explosive potential as health care workers face historically low staffing, skyrocketing inflation, the ceaseless spread of the coronavirus and unsafe working conditions. In response, the capitalist ruling class and their trade union lackeys will revive any method possible to crush workers' resistance, as seen in recent experiences of health care workers at Saint Vincent Hospital in Massachusetts, Kaiser in California and Mercy Health in New York.

While the political establishment and corporate media push the American population to accept the "new normal" of COVID-19, ending all measures to halt the spread of the disease, health care workers will continue to experience the reality of the highly contagious and deadly disease that is killing thousands per day. Workers will continue to face supply shortages, fear of infection, unsafe staffing, jam-packed emergency departments and ICUs filled to capacity.

Conditions at Stanford Health Care are relatively better than those at many other hospitals in the US, however health care workers at Stanford face the same fight for safe working conditions and improved pay, especially as state and federal governments abandon

any mitigation measures against COVID-19.

CRONA newsletter updates express nothing that seriously examines the COVID-19 pandemic. They express no criticism for state and federal abandonment of COVID protections, no outrage over loosening CDC recommendations, nor do they highlight data showing high daily death rates for both children and adults across the US. Instead of waging a real fight against the unsafe COVID-19 policies, the CRONA union is passively supporting the reopening plan carried out by the Biden administration, holding an in-person public event at a restaurant last week. Just several days after this event BNO News reported that 2,236 Americans lost their lives in a single day to COVID-19.

During surges of the coronavirus, health care workers at Stanford experienced a sharp increase in stress and workload as workers fell ill and the hospital was inundated with more patients. All units and personnel are affected, on and off COVID units. When ICU capacity reaches dangerous levels, ICU patients are moved down to regular nursing floors earlier than they usually would, packing regular nursing floors with high acuity patients.

Proposed demands from CRONA as listed on their website include an 8 percent raise each year, higher PTO accrual rates, safer staffing and an improved mental health and wellness program. However, these important demands will largely be abandoned or watered down in the course of negotiations in exchange for minor demands that will cost the hospital nothing.

This is already being demonstrated. After the completion of non-economic negotiations at the end of February, Stanford sent an email to staff announcing that agreements on “multiple issues” had been reached, citing one union proposal that eliminates the need for in-person interviews for nurses who are moving forward in the hospital’s nurse education and professional development program.

CRONA is also implementing another well-worn strategy to blow off steam within its membership and will be holding a one-day “informational picket” on March 9. The fact that this limited picket is being called is an illustration of the rapid, uncontrollable growth of opposition among health care workers and the working class in general, who are determined to win back everything that has been taken from them in decades of concessions, as well as unsafe working conditions

made worse by the coronavirus pandemic.

But to win demands for decent wages and benefits, safe staffing levels and more, nurses and other health care workers must draw the necessary conclusions and build new alternative organizations. We call on Stanford nurses to form rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers, to campaign against any moves by the union and the hospital to push through a sellout deal.



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