

Howard University Hospital staff plan one-day strike due to staffing ratios, low pay

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On Monday, April 11, nearly 300 Howard University Hospital (HUH) nurses and other staff plan to hold a one day strike to protest against the hospital administration's stonewalling, low pay and inadequate staffing levels. Hospital staff has been without a contract since November. The District of Columbia Nurses Association (DCNA), an affiliate of National Nurses United, has filed multiple unfair labor practice complaints against the hospital.

On March 31, the District of Columbia Nurses Association, an affiliate of National Nurses United, served a strike notice to Howard University president Wayne A.I. Frederick and HUH CEO Anita Jenkins. According to American University's *DCist* publication, in addition to low pay and staffing, nurses have accused the hospital of "unilaterally changing some workers' schedules and pay during negotiations, and walking away from the bargaining table."

Nurses at the hospital have reported nearly 100 staff vacancies as of the beginning of the year. According to the *DCist*, "[s]taffing levels... have been decimated by both COVID-19 cases among hospital employees and a staggering amount of vacancies driven by burnout."

Rather than fix the issue with strict nurse-patient ratios, the hospital has filled the gaps by forcing nurses to tend to more patients than is considered safe. In January, Howard nurses rallied in front of the hospital to protest its policies. "We come to work every day, we only got two nurses on the floor most of the time, with 13 patients, 14 patients... That's not safe anymore," said Esmeralda Salgado to the *DCist* at the time.

In addition, the nurses are accusing the hospital of trying to lower their pay during the pandemic. Howard has imposed a "flat rate" wage increase which would severely blunt the take-home pay of more senior employees. Overnight workers and weekend staff will

see a loss in differential pay under the new flat rate system.

HUH spokespeople have denied the DCNA's claims, telling the *DCist* it was "working diligently" to reach a three-year contract with the nurses. The hospital declared it was hiring scabs "to ensure that, during the one day strike, our patients continue to receive the same high-quality care in a safe environment that they expect and deserve."

Howard University Hospital, originally named Freedmen's Hospital, was established in 1862, five years prior to the founding of the school. The National Library of Medicine writes that it was created in the second year of the American Civil War, "to address the needs of thousands of African Americans who poured into Washington, DC... seeking their freedom." The hospital was the first to administer care in the United States to former slaves.

The threatened Howard University Hospital strike is only the latest instance of working class opposition among the workforce at the prestigious historically black college. The strike comes a little over two weeks after a planned walkout of 350 Howard adjunct teachers and non-tenured staff was called off at the last minute by the Service Employees International Union (SIEU) Local 500.

Adjuncts and non-tenured staff were some of the lowest-paid university workers in the D.C.-area, which has a cost of living similar to New York City. Non-tenured workers labored under a "seven year rule," which doesn't allow for them to re-apply to the school after seven years of teaching.

On Monday, the Howard faculty union announced that its members had ratified two contracts which were "not perfect" but nevertheless would be "life-changing." The announcement was a far cry from the

SIEU's previous claim three weeks prior, when it declared a "historic victory" had been achieved as it retreated from its threat to strike.

The nurse strike also comes less than six months after students occupied Howard's Blackburn building for over a month in protest of unsanitary dorms infested with rats, roaches and black mold. Students and the university administration ended the occupation in November 2021, even as students have frequently denounced the college for failing to improve living conditions.

The threatened hospital walkout is the latest demonstration of the growing opposition among the working class globally to the profit system amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Nurses at Howard, as well as throughout the United States and the world, have been placed at ground zero for the multiple waves of COVID-19. Despite being hailed as "heroes" and "essential workers," they have seen their safety dismissed by management in the name of keeping profits flowing.

The Howard strike comes amid a surge of class struggle internationally. In California, 5,000 nurses at the Lucille Packard Children's Hospital and Stanford Health Care complex at Stanford University are preparing to go on strike for better wages and staffing. This follows a series of one-day strikes by over 40,000 Kaiser Permanente workers late last year.

Nurses at the University of Michigan are currently involved in contract discussions between the University of Michigan Professional Nurse Council and their employer, with demands similar to their co-workers worldwide. Nurses throughout the world have expressed outrage at the sentencing of Tennessee nurse RaDonna Vaught, who was convicted of criminally negligent homicide last month after mistakenly administering an incorrect drug to a patient.

Howard nurses should place no faith in the DCNA. The organization, along with its parent organization the NNU, has presided over the current working conditions that prevail in the industry. The organization remained silent as wave after wave of students and workers protested the university, demanding changes and safety, in essence helping to isolate them.

The organization has failed to explain how a single day strike would alter the situation at Howard, in which the hospital has already begun imposing its "final

offer" without even receiving ratification from its workforce.

The DCNA's Smith has referenced the fact that "Howard University is the oldest, Historically Black College in the country," and that "part of its mission is to take care of the underserved minorities in the region," a line which will surely be used to bludgeon its own members back to work if nurses try to assert their rights.

The Howard nurse struggle exposes the narrative that society is fundamentally divided by race, not class. In reality, individuals such as president Wayne A.I. Fredericks (yearly salary: \$1.6 million) and Anita Jenkins (former president of the Sycamore Medical Center in Miamisburg, Ohio and a current executive official of the Adventist Health Care non-profit chain) and the business interests they serve represent a completely different social class who are seeking to place the full weight of the crisis in healthcare on the backs of workers and patients.



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