

Howard University Hospital health care workers hold day-long strike against wage cuts, unsafe staffing

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On Monday, more than 300 nurses, dietitians, social workers and other health care personnel held a day-long strike at Howard University Hospital (HUH). The strike was called because of unsafe staffing ratios, pay cuts and other schemes that place both nurses and the public in danger.

The protest was called by the District of Columbia Nurses Association (DCNA), an affiliate of National Nurses United (NNU), to denounce rampant unsafe practices and abuses of staff throughout the pandemic and before. “The hospital wants to cut pay, staffing, many things, because they aren’t being reimbursed by the insurance companies,” Norma, an HUH health care worker, told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The hospital staff have been working without a contract since November. In February, HUH management walked out on contract negotiations, unilaterally imposing its “final offer” on the staff members at the historic hospital, located in northeast Washington, D.C. The “offer” includes the complete scrapping of differential pay for overnight and weekend staff, replacing it with a “flat rate” not reflective of their additional work burdens.

Other workers are opposed to limited pay raises that don’t keep pace with inflation, which hit 8.5 percent in March according to some estimates.

As with health care workers throughout the globe, HUH staff were placed at ground zero during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Itati, a nurse in the hospital’s catheterization department, said, “During the pandemic, it has been difficult. ... At one point in July/August [of 2020], about halfway through the first year, we were struggling. We had to use trash bags. Instead of shoe covers, trash bags. We didn’t have any

N95s. The hospital gave us only one per week.”

Itati showed the WSWs the scar on the bridge of her nose (pictured), caused by continuous mask use at work, a physical reminder of the toll that working for two years through the pandemic has taken. She explained that a critical issue at HUH was staffing levels. Half of her lab co-workers have quit “because of the unsafe environment,” she said. Others said that their co-workers had died during COVID-19.

“People are being sent into the cath lab [the catheterization unit she works in] and emergency room, very critical patients. They are coming in without being tested [for COVID-19],” Itati said. “We [still] have to take care of people in those conditions.”

The hospital’s nurses also held a protest in January, opposed to the hospital’s unsafe staffing levels amid the COVID-19 Omicron wave. According to *New York Times* on Friday, COVID-19 “cases have doubled in Washington,” going from an average of 50 reported cases daily in early March to over 100 this month. A broad swath of official Washington have become infected recently, “a reminder of sorts that, although many pandemic mandates have lifted, the highly contagious Omicron variant can still evade safety measures,” the *Times* laments.

As COVID-19 cases rise, nurses will again be on the front line, expected to serve at the cost of their own safety and without adequate help. Sierra, a registered nurse, explained to the WSWs what a lack of staffing can lead to. “Typically on the floor we can get up to eight patients,” she said. “They want the nurses to complete all these tasks [before their shift is done]. That gets difficult. Emergencies can happen, beds get full and we’re held responsible.”

She referred to the case of RaDonda Vaught, the Tennessee nurse recently sentenced for criminally negligent homicide due to a medication mistake she made with a patient. Accidents like those happen “when you don’t have safe patient ratios,” Sierra said. “The hospital took no responsibility—everything was put on the nurse.”

None of this has been addressed by HUH management. Yesterday, local station WJLA reported that HUH management had begun implementing pay offers, which the hospital said included a “significant wage increase.” While the first year’s pay scale largely tracks with “market rates,” none of the additional issues are mentioned.

The DCNA, for its part, confined the strike to a single day in order to let nurses blow off steam. Despite the immense anger and justified demands that the nurses and health care workers have, the NNU affiliate has confined its slogans to asking that HUH “negotiate” with it without clarifying about what. This is occurring even as struggles of students, teachers and health workers across the country are breaking related to the same things.

Howard University, which stands among the top tier of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HCBUs), is promoted as a place where African American students can seek refuge from a supposedly white-dominated society and campus administrators are more sympathetic to their needs due to their shared racial characteristics.

“When you’re at an HBCU ... it just becomes about you understanding that there is a whole world of people who are like you,” stated Democratic Senator (now Vice President) and Howard alumna Kamala Harris to the *Washington Post* in 2019, typifying this racialist outlook.

In fact, the nurses’ struggle, along with that of the campus’s non-tenured faculty, who threatened to strike last month due to a lack of adequate pay and job protections, and the crisis facing students in the school’s poorly-maintained dorm rooms, demonstrates that the central division facing workers and students at Howard, is class, not race.

Students and workers at the campus expressed solidarity with the nurses and teachers. “I support the nurses, if they don’t feel adequately supported by the university, I’m all for them striking,” stated Troy, a

psychology student who asked not to be photographed.

Jamarri, another student, forwarded the WSWS a picture in solidarity with the strike. “Howard University Hospital has stood for years and is the ‘Mecca’ [of socially conscious care],” he explained. “You would think Howard University would value the workers who even take care of the staff at times. I stand in solidarity with the nurses and hope they protest until they get their deserved wages.”

According to *Nonprofitlight.com*, Wayne A.I. Frederick, the university president, has a yearly salary of \$1.2 million, not including additional services such as housing and transportation that he receives courtesy of Howard. Edward Cornwell and Hugh Mighty, respectively the school’s surgeon-in-chief and dean of the medical school, bring in a salary of \$759,292 and \$667,064.

President Frederick “should be ashamed of himself,” said Jennifer, another RN. “Of the number of protests and strikes occurring at Howard—you’d think somebody would feel embarrassed. What’s it going to take to open their eyes?” she asked. “I know there are foundations and other people donating money [to the university administration] but they should take that money back, because it’s not being channeled to where it is most needed.”



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