

8,000 in one-day strike at Sutter Health in California: Nurses speak out on working conditions, contract demands

Our reporters
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Eight thousand Sutter Health hospital system nurses and other health care workers went on a one-day strike on Monday, April 18. Nurses across 15 Sutter facilities walked out, citing their opposition to unsafe staffing, improper COVID-19 protocols, and wages that do not keep up with the rate of inflation. Nurses were notified the Friday before the picket that they would be locked out by the hospital until the end of the week.

Sutter nurses have been working under an expired contract since June 2021. The contract was previously extended the year before. As a result, nurses reported that they have only received a 6 percent wage increase in the past 18 months.

The Sutter strike was called after nurses voted nearly unanimously in March to strike in opposition to the hospital's proposed contract, which contains real wage cuts and lacks any clear changes to staffing plans. The nurses' union, California Nurses Association (CNA), is not offering nurses a cent in strike pay. California Nurses Association is affiliated with the larger National Nurses United, a subsidiary of the AFL-CIO. Notably, neither the CNA officials who gave speeches at the strike nor CNA official press releases raise the issue of wages. Rank-and-file nurses told WSWS reporters that the hospital is currently pushing for 2 percent increases per year of the contract.

The situation facing nurses across the Sutter Health hospital system is an expression of the irrationality of the capitalist system. As hospital CEOs watch their earnings skyrocket, the nurses and other health care workers who continue to put their lives at risk during the COVID-19 pandemic face real wage cuts, lack of proper personal protective equipment (PPE), and staffing ratios that put patients and workers in danger

on a daily basis.

The strike of Sutter nurses has been limited by their trade union, the California Nurses Association, to one day, for fear of sparking a much wider movement of opposition among nurses and workers in other industries across the country and internationally. There is a growing movement of workers across the world in opposition to the rapidly rising rate of inflation exacerbated by the war in Ukraine between the US/NATO and Russia. The emerging movement for higher wages and safe working conditions spans from 600 Chevron workers in Richmond, California, 40,000 grocery workers in Southern California and 5,000 Stanford nurses in Palo Alto, California, to truckers in Spain, teachers in Iran and workers across Sri Lanka.

Sutter nurses spoke to WSWS reporters on the picket lines at Mills-Peninsula Medical Center (MPMC) in Burlingame and California Pacific Medical Center (CPMC) in San Francisco. Nurses interviewed preferred to remain anonymous and their names have been changed.

Marjorie has worked at MPMC in Burlingame since 2004. She stated, "It has been crazy during the pandemic. We weren't allowed to wear N95s for a long time. They weren't even allowing double masking. A manager would literally make you take them off."

She then spoke about the California Department of Public Health guideline change in January that allowed nurses to come to work while COVID-19 positive. "Then when they started having us come back to work with COVID we were suddenly allowed to wear N95s. The PPE rules were just changing every day."

Marjorie then spoke about the issues that concern her most in the contract negotiations. "We can't retain staff

with the conditions and wages we have now. Nurses come here just to get trained and then they move on. They want to reduce our education leave to half what it is now, which means we won't have enough available leave to learn and improve our practice and take all our required courses."

She added, "One hundred percent of us voted for this strike. I do think it would make a bigger impact if it was more than one day."

Other nurses echoed Marjorie's concern about the limited nature of the strike. Tara told the WSWs, "This is my first strike so I'm just learning about how this works. I don't know why it's just one day. It doesn't make much sense to me. I also think we should have gone on strike earlier. Why not at the peak of the pandemic when we really could have put pressure on the hospital?"

Nurses continued to speak on the high turnover rate of employees. One MPMC nurse said, "Six nurses left in one month because the pay is so low. They can earn more in other hospitals. We need a raise that keeps up with inflation. Management has been cutting the non-medical staff so that in some cases there is only one housekeeper in a ward. That means that nurses have to fill in."

Julie, a nurse at CPMC in San Francisco with over 15 years of experience, described why she joined the picket. "This is about patient safety. We want to be treated fairly and we want to help the community.

"The pandemic was stressful and this is already a stressful job. More people are leaving bedside nursing than are coming in. They are not replacing these nurses and we are told to pick up the slack. I think this one-day strike is to make a point, but we should go out on strike again."

After some discussion about conditions at other hospitals, she added, "Ideally, we would all go out. Sutter, Kaiser and Stanford. But it is hard. Nurses are used to making sacrifices and it is hard for us to think of putting people at risk by going on strike."

Asked about the cost of living, Julie stated, "I live an hour away. We make a decent wage, but it costs too much to live in San Francisco. It is costing me \$70 to fill up my tank and I spent \$150 last week. I'm not driving a gas guzzler and everything I do is close to my home. All that was really just going to work."

Asked about money going to the war in Ukraine

while COVID-19 programs are defunded, she replied, "the Fed and the states are cutting things and Kaiser and Sutter make record profits. They act like they are poor, but they could make up for these cuts."

Two nurses at the Burlingame picket, Li and Marge, described how Li is routinely pressured by her management to clock out at the end of her shift and work for no pay while finishing charting and patient care tasks. It is common practice for nurses in all hospitals to stay 30 minutes or more after a shift to finish work, especially during a busy or short-staffed shift.

"It's really terrible," Li stated. "It's the culture of the unit. If nurses are staying over they tell you that you have to work on your time management skills. Then they really pressure you to clock out if you must stay over because it costs the hospital money."

Nurses also spoke about the importance of other health care strikes in the immediate area and more broadly across the globe. Several nurses from Stanford Healthcare joined Sutter nurses in support of their strike. Stanford nurses are set to go on strike April 25. Stanford has announced that it will be cutting off health benefits for its nurses on April 30.

When asked about the upcoming struggle at Stanford, a veteran nurse of over 20 years stated, "I support all my brothers and sisters in nursing fields. Patient care is paramount. A strike doesn't work unless everybody goes out."



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