

What way forward for the nurses strike at Stanford Health?

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Roughly 5,000 registered nurses at Stanford Health Care and Lucile Packard Children's Hospital begin a strike today in the San Francisco area. Nurses are demanding wage increases, mental health support, no cuts to their health care plans and an end to the chronic understaffing, which has worsened significantly over the course of the pandemic.

The strike is a major episode in the growing upsurge of struggles by the international working class, driven by the catastrophic social impact of the coronavirus pandemic and the Biden administration's reckless drive to war with Russia. Striking Stanford nurses join hundreds of thousands of workers in the South Asian island nation of Sri Lanka, who are demanding the fall of the government in response to the spiraling cost of living, as well a wave of strikes by nurses and health care workers around the world.

Stanford Health is a leading teaching hospital on the United States West Coast, but just as at other facilities around the country and the world, Stanford nurses are fighting against the consequences of an entirely preventable public health catastrophe which has left them in increasingly untenable working conditions. Forty-five percent of those surveyed by the Stanford nurses' union, the Committee for Recognition of Nursing Achievement (CRONA), are considering leaving the profession.

Stanford Health increased its net assets by over \$1 billion from 2020 to 2021 and received over \$500 million in COVID-19 grants during the same period. But this money is going into pockets of wealthy administrators and the for-profit health care industry, not to nurses or improvements in hospital conditions. A major sewage leak occurred in February of this year, closing a bone marrow transplant unit for months for repairs. This unit is critical for treating immunocompromised patients.

Management is demanding even further cuts. The contract proposal would eliminate the most affordable health care option for nurses, meaning those who currently have this plan would be required to pay an extra \$150 to \$500 a month for insurance for themselves and their families. Meanwhile, Stanford is hiring travel nurses as strikebreakers for \$13,000

per week and is threatening to vindictively cut off health care benefits for nurses during the strike.

Stanford nurses must take a stand for health care workers. If this battle is won, it will set the precedent to substantially improve the wages of all health care workers, end chronic understaffing and ensure the protection of workers and patients from the ravages of the pandemic.

Two-and-a-half years into the pandemic, COVID has claimed over 1 million lives in the United States and at least 20 million worldwide. Nearly every one of these deaths were preventable, sacrificed for the sake of Wall Street profits. The experience in China, a country of 1.4 billion where only 5,000 have lost their lives, has proven that robust measures such as temporary lockdowns, testing and contact tracing can contain the spread of the disease and save lives.

Instead, the US and the rest of the world rejected lockdowns, but not mass death, as too "costly." As a result, every few months hospitals have been overwhelmed by surges of new COVID-19 patients with nurses pushed past their breaking point.

Now they are eliminating whatever measures had ever existed, forcing society to "fly blind" even as a new surge is currently underway. Wastewater data from Santa Clara County show that present COVID-19 levels in Palo Alto have already exceeded those during the Delta wave, suggesting widespread and growing community transmission. Despite this, from California to Florida, the pandemic is being presented as all but "over." The virus, however, pays little mind to the self-serving lies of the corporate media, the Biden administration and the rest of the political establishment.

But a new mood of opposition is emerging within the working class. This was demonstrated at Stanford by the 93 percent strike authorization vote. The conditions are emerging for a global movement by the working class against the profit-driven sacrifice of human life to the pandemic. The pandemic, as well as runaway inflation and the economic and social dislocation caused by the pandemic and the US-NATO conflict with Russia, are driving workers

into mass protests and strikes all over the world.

California is emerging as an important front in this global counteroffensive. Last Monday, 8,000 nurses and health care workers carried out a one-day strike at 15 Northern California Sutter Health locations. Fourteen thousand health care workers, including 2,000 nurses, at the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles are also set to strike this month.

Over the next three months, contracts are set to expire for hundreds of thousands of California workers in other industries, including tens of thousands of dock workers and other workers occupying crucial choke points in global supply chains. Five hundred Chevron oil refinery workers are already on strike in Richmond, California.

Throughout the country, opposition to impossible working conditions for nurses are finding expression in mass outrage over the case of RaDonda Vaught, who was convicted of negligent homicide for administering the incorrect medication to a patient. It is the major hospitals themselves who should be charged with “negligent homicide.” These health care giants, which bring in billions in revenue, have overseen LEAN hospital models for years, prioritizing understaffing to save money. This has amounted to the abuse of both nurses and patients and has resulted in pushing more nurses out of the field.

The strike by Stanford nurses must be made a spearhead of this global offensive by the working class. The decisive question, however, is how this is to be achieved? Experience proves that if the strike is left in the hands of the union bureaucracy, who are little more than agents of management who work to divide workers by workplace and nationality, then it will be isolated and betrayed. A new orientation is required.

Although CRONA collected \$3 million in dues last year, it is not offering a dime in strike pay, forcing these 5,000 nurses to fend for themselves in one of the most expensive areas of the United States without health care coverage as they face down the \$10 billion health care giant.

Even the wage increases that CRONA is proposing would represent a massive decline in nurses’ real compensation. With inflation currently at 8.5 percent, the highest in four decades, CRONA is only proposing a 7 percent wage increase, only modestly above the Stanford Health proposal of 5, 4 and 3 percent wage increases in years 1-3 of the contract plus one-time “incentive payments.”

The other unions are also working to isolate the strike, keeping nurses at other hospitals on the job even though they are fighting against the same conditions. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), for example, is restricting strike action at Sinai to only one day.

The unions long ago have become bought-and-paid-for

agents of management. Last year, the unions at Kaiser Permanente called off a strike by tens of thousands of health care workers and rammed through a concessions contract containing deep cuts in exchange for tens of millions in corporate funding for the union bureaucracy.

Stanford nurses cannot allow the unions to betray another struggle. This means the creation of a rank-and-file strike committee, democratically controlled by nurses themselves. The basic aims of this committee will be to appeal for the broadest possible unity and solidarity for the strike from nurses across the US and the world. It will create the means for nurses to formulate and fight for their own demands and not the pitiful crumbs which CRONA will attempt to palm off as a victory. It will establish rank-and-file control over the conduct of the strike and negotiations.

To achieve this, the committee should organize around the following demands:

- Full strike pay from CRONA! Nurses must be adequately provisioned for the strike so management is unable to wear them down on the picket line.
- The maintenance of health care benefits during the strike! Demand that CRONA refuse to sit down for ANY negotiations until full health care coverage is restored!
- All negotiations livestreamed to nurses! “Talks” organized behind the backs of nurses do nothing but provide the union bureaucracy with the means to conspire with management against them.

In addition, we propose that nurses resolve that they will not accept any contract brought back to them by the union which does not include the following:

- A 15 percent wage increase each year of the contract, on top of annual cost-of-living adjustments to counteract inflation.
- No out-of-pocket costs for family health care plans.
- Hire thousands of new nurses to guarantee nurse-to-patient ratios, including 1:1 for the ICU, 1:2 for the IICU and 1:3 for Medsurge.

Finally, nurses must also use their strike to **demand freedom for RaDonda Vaught**, the dropping of all charges against her and the reinstatement of her nursing license with no blemish on her record.

If you agree with this program, contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today for help building the Rank-and-File Strike Committee at Stanford.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)