

Stanford nurses must not fight alone: For a California-wide health care worker strike to fight understaffing and the erosion of living standards

Norisa Diaz
26 April 2022

Five thousand Stanford and Packard nurses have launched a powerful and open-ended strike for wages, mental health services and a halt to dangerous understaffing, which has undermined patient safety and driven hundreds of thousands of nurses from the profession.

The striking nurses are taking a stand for all health care workers who want to fight the abuse by giant hospital chains whose priority is profit, not saving lives. Throughout the pandemic, nurses at Stanford, like their brothers and sisters throughout the US and the world, have suffered mass infection, lack of PPE, and the tragic loss of thousands of frontline workers.

Now nurses and other health care workers are starting to fight back. The battle at Stanford takes place as tens of thousands of California nurses engage in or prepare for strikes at Sutter, Los Angeles' Cedars-Sinai, Kaiser Permanente, University of California and other locations. In the next few months, tens of thousands of other health care workers have contracts expiring in Michigan, New York, Illinois and other states.

This is not only happening in the US. In recent weeks, hundreds of thousands of nurses and other health care workers have struck in Italy, Germany, Turkey, Australia, New Zealand, Sri Lanka and many other countries. No matter what state or what country, health care workers face the same problems and are in the same fight.

The growing sentiment for a united struggle was summed up by a Cedars-Sinai nurse who told the WSWS, "I'm glad nurses are striking in Northern California too ... We need to all go out together!" But transforming this powerful sentiment for unity into concrete, common action requires a new strategy and new forms of

organization.

The Committee for Recognition of Nursing Achievement (CRONA) is appealing to Stanford Health for a "fair contract" and has asked Democratic legislators to urge management to back off on its threat to stop health care coverage. These appeals are falling on deaf ears. Stanford Health's board of trustees is stacked with billionaires, Silicon Valley executives and other powerful corporate and political figures. They have no intention of making concessions that would set a higher standard for the wages and working conditions of other workers in the health care industry and outside.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the fortunes of Musk, Bezos and Gates and the rest of America's billionaires rose 62 percent even as 1 million people in the US unnecessarily died from COVID and tens of millions struggle from paycheck to paycheck. The board's plans to cut off health care benefits to nurses show the utter ruthlessness with which the corporate and financial elite defend their class interests.

Stanford nurses and all health care workers must defend their class interests with the same uncompromising determination. What does this mean?

First of all, it means appealing to health care workers throughout California, the US and internationally for common action. To do this, Stanford and Packard nurses should elect a rank-and-file strike committee, made up of the most militant and class-conscious workers. This committee must establish direct lines of communication with Sutter, Kaiser, University of California and other nurses and build up support for statewide strike action.

Second, Stanford nurses need their incomes protected throughout the strike. The provision of full pay for the

duration of the struggle will demonstrate to Stanford and other hospital chains that workers are prepared for a protracted fight and that they cannot starve strikers into submission. To pay for this, rank-and-file workers must demand that the assets of CRONA and, above all, the major statewide health care unions—including the California Nurses Association (CNA)/National Nurses United and United Healthcare Workers (UHW)-West—are made available to Stanford workers to sustain their strike.

The CNA alone has nearly \$400 million in assets but it squanders workers' dues money on union executive salaries of \$280,000 and more, and millions for campaign contributions and lobbying efforts to Sacramento Democrats.

Third, the rank-and-file strike committee must urge workers to build similar democratically controlled organizations in their own hospitals and medical facilities. The miserable conditions nurses confront across the state are the direct result of decades of concession contracts by the CNA and UHW, including the miserable deal the United Nurses Association of California/Union of Health Care Professionals imposed on Kaiser workers last year to block a strike by 50,000 workers.

While the various unions keep health care workers divided and organize ineffectual one- and two-day strikes, the rank-and-file committees will fight for an open-ended statewide strike to win the demands workers and their families need. Rank-and-file nurses should insist that there are no negotiations until Stanford drops its threat to cut off medical benefits. All talks afterwards must be live-streamed with no backroom discussions or interference from "neutral" mediators.

No agreement should be ratified unless it includes:

- **15 percent annual wage increases and COLA to protect against inflation**
- **The hiring of 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.**
- **Rank-and-file oversight of staffing levels, pace and hours of work, and health and safety.**
- **Full PPE and safeguards because the pandemic is far from over.**

At the same time, Stanford and Packard nurses should also raise important political demands, including the dropping of all charges and the reinstatement of Nashville nurse RaDonda Vaught. She is being scapegoated and railroaded to jail by Vanderbilt University Medical Center and Tennessee authorities for the medical errors, which are inevitably produced by the cost-cutting measures of

the profit-driven health care system.

The demand for safe staffing and an end to exhausting schedules is at the forefront of every health care struggle. Central to the Hippocratic oath is the fundamental belief that health care is a human and social right. This powerful cornerstone of modern medicine is at complete odds with the profit motive in health care which champions LEAN staffing models, causing burnout and a state of near collapse. Profits cannot be allowed to dictate if an MRI or surgery is denied. The provision of high-quality health care can only be secured by taking profit out of medicine and establishing a system of socialist medicine, as part of the socialist reorganization of society based on human needs.

The claims by Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and other Democrats that universal health care can be provided through appeals to the powers that be is a fraud. This is underscored by the recent dropping of California Assembly Bill AB 1400, also known as the Guaranteed Health Care for All Act, by the Democratic-controlled state legislature. Though the Democrats touted the claim that it would ensure free health care to 40 million Californians, from the beginning it was a stunt, which was never intended to see the light of day.

Like the Republicans, Newsom and the Democrats serve the interests of the health care giants, insurance companies and major corporations. Since taking office, Biden has fully adopted Trump's COVID "herd immunity" policy of mass infection, has continued the attack on immigrants, and is now pursuing a reckless policy of military confrontation with Russia that could result in nuclear war and the annihilation of the planet.

Among broad masses of workers, there is no support for war and the demands that workers bear the costs of raging inflation and the global economic crisis while the super-rich are doing better than ever. The Stanford and Packard strike is part of a growing global counteroffensive of the working class. Every worker, in the health care industry and without, has a huge stake in the victory of this strike.

We urge Stanford and Packard nurses to contact us for more information in forming a rank-and-file strike committee.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact