Newark, New Jersey healthcare workers strike against low wages and understaffing

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More than 300 nurses, respiratory therapists and radiology technicians began a 10-day strike on Monday, May 23 at Saint Michael's Medical Center in Newark, New Jersey. The action is the latest in a wave of strikes and protests of healthcare workers in the United States and internationally.

Saint Michael's workers are fighting against low wages, inadequate health insurance, insufficient supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) and understaffing. The hospital is demanding givebacks in the new contract and has been unresponsive to workers' concerns about safety and pensions.

The previous contract expired on May 4, and the Jersey Nurses Economic Security Organization (JNESO) issued a strike notice on May 11. A negotiating session is scheduled for May 31.

The nurses' hourly wage is $44, which Saint Michael's workers argue is not competitive in the current job market. Nurses also are protesting Saint Michael's poor healthcare benefits. The choices include a widely criticized self-insurance plan that reportedly entails a $11,000 deductible, a $10,000 out-of-pocket ceiling and no out-of-network coverage.

PPE is also a crucial need during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. New Jersey recorded 5,194 new cases and 13 deaths on May 27. The Saint Michael's workers are calling for more supplies such as masks and gowns. Rather than protecting its employees, the hospital has been rationing PPE and providing it in quantities that are inconsistent with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

These unacceptable conditions have contributed to a staffing shortage at Saint Michael's. The hospital is short 42 registered nurses and 17 technicians. This is part of a massive understaffing and overwork of nurses enormously exacerbated by the pandemic. As at other hospitals, understaffing at Saint Michael's is a deliberate policy intended to reduce expenses and increase profits.

Prime Healthcare, the company that owns Saint Michael's, is offering insulting two percent annual raises for each of the three years of the proposed contract. The current inflation rate is greater than eight percent, and these terms would mean a significant cut in healthcare workers' real wages.

On top of this pay cut, the company wants to do away with annual seniority-based raises (known as "step" pay increments) that are paid in addition to the contractual raises. It also seeks to eliminate a prohibition on "floating" so that nurses can be assigned to units with which they are not familiar and for which they have not been trained.

Prime Healthcare, which is based in Ontario, California, bought Saint Michael's after the hospital had fallen into bankruptcy. The company's other holdings in New Jersey are Saint Mary's General Hospital in Passaic and Saint Clare's hospitals in Denville and Dover. Prime Healthcare has not only exploited its staff, but it also reportedly has been unable to negotiate reimbursement rates with major insurance companies in the state such as Aetna and United Healthcare.

JNESO is calling for a six percent raise in each year of the contract. While this proposal is more than the company's, it, too, would mean a cut in real wages. This fact and the union's decision to limit the strike to 10 days demonstrate that JNESO is not waging a serious fight for workers' needs.

Furthermore, JNESO has filed Unfair Labor Practices (ULP) complaints against the hospital, including an assertion that the administration refuses to bargain in good faith. Strikes carried out under a ULP designation

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are limited to “noneconomic” demands (i.e., those unrelated to pay and working conditions). The trade unions routinely use this tactic to impose an agreement that favors the company and to end the strike without meeting workers’ demands.

The healthcare workers in Newark are far from alone in facing understaffing, overwork, low pay and substandard health insurance. Across the country, nurses are striking and protesting the same conditions. On Tuesday, more than 400 mental health workers in Minneapolis, Minnesota, struck for one day at M Health Fairview University of Minnesota and two Allina Health hospitals over the same issues.

Workers at Providence Saint Vincent in Portland, Oregon, authorized a strike earlier this month. In California, workers have struck at Cedars-Sinai, Stanford, Packard, Sutter and Kaiser Permanente. In addition, the contract for approximately 6,000 nurses at the University of Michigan Health System will expire in July.

Nor is healthcare workers’ anger confined to the United States. Workers in New Zealand and Germany also have staged actions this month over similar issues.

The unions have worked to isolate nurses and sabotage all these struggles. At Cedars-Sinai, the Service Employees International Union-United Healthcare Workers West ended hospital workers’ strike after five days without reaching any agreement. At Stanford, the Committee for Recognition of Nursing Achievement abruptly ended the strike and imposed a contract that ignored workers’ demands for staffing improvements and wage increases. Despite the looming expiration of the contract with University of Michigan Health System, the Michigan Nurses Association-U-M Professional Nurses Council has made no serious preparations for a fight.

Healthcare workers are learning through bitter experience that the trade unions no longer fight for their interests in any meaningful sense. In every industry, the trade unions have progressively integrated themselves into the companies with which they supposedly negotiate.

On May 22, nurses from across the country took a significant step forward in their fight. At a meeting hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site Healthcare Workers Newsletter*, workers founded a national steering committee to help establish rank-and-file committees at every hospital and workplace. These committees will be independent of the trade unions and of both political parties.

Their immediate goal will be to defend the interests of all healthcare workers. But the committees will also work to connect workers’ struggles in a united fight against the root cause of their exploitation: the for-profit healthcare system.

To get involved in the organization of healthcare workers rank-and-file committees, fill out the form at the bottom of this page.

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