

# SEIU says it has reached a tentative contract agreement covering Los Angeles County nurses

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Last Friday Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 721 announced that it had reached an agreement for a three-year contract covering 7,000 Los Angeles County nurses. While not all the details have been released, it is clear that the agreement meets none of the nurses' demands for substantial wage increases and drastic improvements in stressful working conditions caused by staff shortages and overwork.

Meanwhile, a three-day strike that had been set for Wednesday, June 1, has been canceled. Such a strike would encompass workers at four county hospitals in Los Angeles, plus dozens of county clinics.

The nurses are part of a larger bargaining unit comprising 55,000 Los Angeles County employees. A tentative agreement for those other workers had been negotiated two weeks earlier. The agreed-upon wage increase for the county workers, a mere 12 percent raise over three years, does not keep up with inflation, now running at 8.5 percent annually and hitting particularly hard in the areas of food, fuel and housing costs.

The agreement with the Los Angeles County nurses contains an extra 3 percent wage increase over the other county workers, totaling 15 percent over three years, plus double time for overtime. The increase, while marginally better, is still far below the official inflation rate. It is doubly inadequate given that nurses and county workers have had no wage increases since the pandemic began.

The raises do nothing to address the crisis in staffing that is afflicting all public and private hospitals due to stress, overwork and poor pay. The chronic nursing shortage has been greatly worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

SEIU Local 721 President David Green, when

announcing the end of negotiations, did not mention wages, only focusing on working conditions for nurses, including forced overtime shifts.

In a statement meant to divide nurses and cover the union's abject betrayal, Green denounced the use of "traveling nurses" brought in from other states, often at higher wages than nurses employed by the county. "They're making more than our nurses," he said. "So you might have one nurse earning \$2,000 more than the nurse right next to them. And it's not just with nurses, it's with other departments as well. That's the county's dirty little secret, and we want people to know about it."

After declaring this a "historic agreement," Green declared that county officials had finally been forced by the SEIU's hard bargaining and threat of strike to address the understaffing of nurses at county hospitals and cut down on the use of traveling nurses. Echoing his words, negotiator Cynthia Mitchell said that the results of these negotiations signal to all "up and coming nurses" that the county "is serious and committed to recruitment."

The staffing issues are not new, as the shortage of nurses has a long history in California and across the United States. With the continuing pandemic the shortage is reaching a breaking point.

In March 2020, the California Department of Public Health agreed to pay a for-profit traveling nurse provider \$1 billion over six months to help hospitals meet nursing shortages.

Meanwhile, also in 2020, a strike movement by Los Angeles and Riverside County nurses was sabotaged by the SEIU.

In September 2021, California Governor Gavin

Newsom enacted emergency provisions to ensure adequate staffing, including the use of traveling nurses.

However, the above “solutions” for the staffing crisis of Los Angeles County nurses are contributing to the staffing crises at hospitals elsewhere in Los Angeles area and the country.

Many factors affect the shortage of nurses. Among them is the closure of nursing schools and an immigrant visa backlog for foreign-trained nurses.

In a May 26 article, the *Los Angeles Times* quoted nurses that expressed their concerns in the current struggle.

“I was not certain up until the time of an agreement that we would not strike,” said Del Valle Thompson, 70. “We didn’t want to strike, but we would have if necessary.”

“The county didn’t appreciate us or take us seriously after everything we did during the pandemic,” said Markeitha Harris, a public health nurse. “It wasn’t right, and we were ready to strike.”

Harris said that during the COVID-19 pandemic’s first surge in 2020, she purchased her own N95 masks when county supplies ran low. She has delayed vacations and worked all but two days of a recent vacation that was supposed to last two weeks, she said.

All SEIU-represented county workers will vote on both agreements on June 16. Workers should demand the release of all details of the proposed contract and prepare to reject any agreement that does not address their basic demands for a real increase in wages and a safe and a healthy work environment.



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