

Union announces sellout tentative agreement for 1,600 Providence St. Vincent nurses in Portland, Oregon

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6 June 2022

Do you work at Providence? Contact us to tell what you think about the ONA's tentative agreement, and register for our next Nurses Rank-and-File Committee public online meeting this Sunday, June 12th at 11:00 a.m. Pacific.

On Saturday, the Oregon Nurses Association (ONA) announced a tentative agreement for 1,600 nurses at Providence St. Vincent Medical Center in Portland. Widespread opposition is building against this sellout agreement, which includes meager wage increases, inadequate promises for paid time off and healthcare benefits protections, and no real improvements to staffing, workloads or job safety.

The union is encouraging a “yes” vote because of the “unprecedented achievements together” with Providence executives. The union intends to push through the contract in order to prevent a strike of Providence nurses, which would quickly attract broad support by health care workers across the state and nation.

The St. Vincent nurses authorized a strike on May 4 with a nearly unanimous vote. The ONA, however, never announced a strike date with the legally mandated 10 days advance notice. One St. Vincent nurse told us that the ONA claimed they were waiting to call a strike until the other locations held their strike votes, so they could all strike together.

This, however, turned out to be a lie. Two days before the ONA announced a tentative agreement, 400 fellow nurses at Providence Willamette Falls and Milwaukie unanimously authorized a strike, limited by the union again to unfair labor practices reasons. Their contracts expired on May 31, five months after the December 31 expiration at St. Vincent.

World Socialist Web Site urges Providence nurses to form an independent rank-and-file committee to coordinate with each other and organize a struggle to win their urgent demands. The first course of action will be to reject this tentative agreement, building support among the rank and file for a “no” vote.

Nurses received details about the agreement on Monday, but these have not been published yet. The contract highlights a 14 percent wage increase spread out over three years, down from the union's initial demand for a 20 percent increase. With the current inflation rate at over 8 percent, a 4.6 percent annual increase means a pay cut for nurses who have already seen their real wages decline over the previous three-year contract.

The contract fails to add substantial paid time-off hours for personal and vacation time, and includes meager one-time bonuses for ratification rather than retroactive pay. In terms of benefits, the union asserts there will be no cost increases and that the contract establishes “a pathway for reducing health plan costs for RNs in 2024.”

Finally, the contract does next to nothing to address the staffing crisis, which is the biggest issue facing health care workers due to the associated unsafe conditions for patients and high-stress workloads for staff. The ONA highlights “improved staffing language” that incorporates “the criteria for unit staffing in Oregon's RN staffing Law and enhances Providence's commitment to daily nurse staffing.”

In other words, the state recommendations which Providence is already mandated to meet are being presented as the most significant addition to the staffing portion of the contract. Seeing as neither state laws or

Providence's empty "commitment" has yet to offset the staffing crisis, nurses know that this contract will change nothing.

Providence nurses are in a powerful position to reject this contract. They already showed their determination to fight for what they need when they authorized a strike in May.

In forming an independent Providence Nurses Rank-and-File Committee, nurses can elaborate their demands for a strike, such as steep wage increases, mandated written requirements for safe staffing ratios, improvements to workplace conditions such as guaranteed breaks, adequate paid time off and retroactive pay.

Nurses at St. Vincent can unite their fight with the nurses at Willamette Falls, Milwaukie and four other Providence hospitals in the area, who confront the same issues in their contract struggle and will be isolated if the St. Vincent contract passes. Furthermore, there are tens of thousands of nurses at Kaiser, Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU), and Oregon State Hospital, not to mention CNAs and other health care workers who would readily join forces with RNs.

While the union commonly refers to nurses at OHSU and Kaiser as market competitors in contract negotiations, they are Providence nurses' strongest allies in fighting for a common struggle for their collective interests. The issues nurses face are universal. In fact, OHSU recently implemented "contingency capacity staffing" based on staffing impacts related to COVID-19, current hospital occupancy, and current emergency department demand. The Pediatric ICU at OHSU is also extremely short-staffed and reaching crisis levels of staffing.

Oregon nurses are entering into struggle as part of a broad movement of health care workers in the United States and internationally. On May 27, around 40 nurses walked off the job at Orlando Regional Medical Center in Florida, after short staffing resulted in the unnoticed suicide of a patient. There have also been strikes by 300 health care workers at Saint Michael's Medical Center in New Jersey, thousands of Stanford and Cedars-Sinai nurses in California, and roughly 2,000 nurses at North Rhine-Westphalia's university hospitals in Germany, to name just a few.

Nurses united in a common struggle have immense power to transform the current rotten system which

subordinates patient care and health care workers' well-being to the generation of revenue and profit, competing with other systems on a private market.

Although Providence claims a "nonprofit" status, the hospital's top 14 executives received raises exceeding \$14 million in 2017, a 59 percent increase from 2016. In 2021, Providence reported the generation of \$238 million in gains and \$5.3 billion in revenues, along with receiving \$1.3 billion in CARES Act funding.

The demands of health care workers can only be won through a united struggle to challenge the trillion-dollar private health care industry, redirecting the profits of a tiny few to the urgent needs of workers and patients. We encourage all Providence health care workers interested in joining this struggle to contact us today.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact