

“There’s power in the people and the more you come together and the bigger you are, the stronger you become”

Striking Newark nurses speak out on the picket line

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On Monday, the 300 nurses, respiratory therapists and radiology technicians on strike at Saint Michael’s Medical Center in Newark, New Jersey marked the third week of their struggle with a public rally. Workers at Saint Michael’s are fighting against low wages, inadequate health insurance, understaffing and a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE).

More than 100 striking workers, family and community members turned out to show their collective support. Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* attended the rally and spoke to workers about their struggle and the broader movement of health care workers across the US and internationally.

Mary, an operating room nurse, has worked at Saint Michael’s for 18 years and was born at the hospital.

Speaking about the current owners, Prime Healthcare—a for-profit organization which bought Saint Michael’s in 2016 amid bankruptcy—Mary said, “They’re saying [to workers] that you’re lucky we’re even working... But [the 2016 buyout] has nothing to do with what is going on now.

“We just want to do our jobs and for things to be fair. Is that so hard to ask? For them to be paying all these traveling nurses coming in, three or four times what we’re being paid—come on, we’re not asking for that. We just want something comparable and competitive with the other hospitals in the area.

“I love what I’m doing and I’m good at what I’m doing, but when you have to deal with *this*, it distracts you from why you became a nurse. You want to give patients compassion, show dignity. That’s how everybody is here, but when you have all this nonsense—I mean, we’re trying to make things better, negotiate for better wages and they actually are taking things away from us. And we’re not only trying to improve our conditions, but there’s also inflation and all of that stuff.”

Pointing to the hospital closures in Newark, one of the poorest big cities in the US, she said, “It’s just a shame. This community needs Saint Michael’s. I’ve been here 18 years and I’ve seen Saint James close, Columbus close—there are no hospitals left in Newark. So if this ever closed down... I could

probably get a job at one of these big fancy pretty hospitals—Morristown Memorial, Hackensack—just because you’re big and pretty, doesn’t make you get better nursing care. I’ve always said that. But I don’t want to get a job anywhere because I feel my service is most needed here.”

In response to asking about unifying the emerging struggles of healthcare workers today, Mary said, “Of course! There’s power in the people and the more you come together and the bigger you are, the stronger you become.”

Mary agreed with the WSWs that this fight can’t be solely with one employer, but must take up a struggle against an entire system that subordinates public health to profit interests. “It is systemic—not just with the hospital system, but everything.”

Mary also spoke about her experience as a nurse during the pandemic. “It’s so sad because I think most people came to the nursing or medical field to help people. But when you can’t be protected during the pandemic ... we’re putting our lives out there. Let me tell you, it was rough! Some of the PPEs were scarce, we were actually making our own plastic gowns. We got big rolls of clear soft plastic and we were making our own.”

Mary told the WSWs that the union isn’t giving the workers any strike pay. “Nothing. I asked about that; is there anything that can help subsidize, just a little bit? This is day 15 for us. I’m ok financially right now, but I’m sure some of my coworkers aren’t. I’m sure some people are really starting to freak out. Some people do live paycheck to paycheck.”

Joanny, who has worked at Saint Michael’s for 24 years, described what it’s like working for Prime: “It feels horrible because you feel unappreciated. You feel everything that you do or did is not worth it. You come here every day giving your best, but you don’t feel it’s coming back the same way.”

Lesley, a Saint Michael’s worker on strike, also spoke to the WSWs about the conditions she and her coworkers are facing.

“Our health care is worse than Medicaid. We can only go to Prime doctors. The problem is most of the doctors that work around here don’t accept the Prime insurance because the

payback is very low and it takes much longer than the other insurance companies do, so they don't want to be part of the Prime insurance. So we're limited to going to doctors that are very low on the health grade scale and why should we as health care workers have to go to doctors that are, you know, *horrible*?!

"The police, the fire department, they all have excellent, top-of-the-line lifetime benefits. And as nursing professionals, why are we getting *less* than Medicaid?

"There's no incentive here to bring somebody into work when the wages are less than the surrounding area hospitals and the benefits, like I said, are worse than all the other hospitals. If you went for a job in the Barnabas system you have hundreds of doctors to choose from that are all Castle Connolly top ten doctors of New Jersey. There's not one here that is."

A WSWs reporter raised the previous fraud by Prime Healthcare, and Lesley responded, "Oh yeah, last July, \$37.5 million they were found guilty on. It was a big article all done from a whistleblower. A few years before that there was another huge Medicare fraud. And they see fraud in here all the time, there's a lot of fraudulent activity that goes on."

When our reporter pointed out that the working class has borne the brunt of the pandemic and is being made to pay the price, Lesley stated, "We always do. It doesn't matter what it is. We always do. When you have your athletes, your celebrities, your CEOs making millions of dollars compared to everyone else in the country... For this country to be so powerful, yet we struggle so much every day, you know? When you're throwing billions of dollars into building a stadium, but you've still got half of Louisiana that never came back from Katrina, but you forgot them."

In response, our reporter noted that billions of dollars were spent to fund war abroad. Lesley said, "Yes, and you're not taking care of your own people. It's never changed and as long as they still have the upper hand in that power, it will never change. Then it gets very political."

Michel, Richarde and **Maria** are respiratory therapists who are the first to treat patients with respiratory ailments like asthma when they come into the emergency room with difficulty breathing.

Michel spoke about the inadequate health care benefits workers receive: "We are taking care of patients, of the sick. But as health care workers, we don't have the best benefits. So when we get sick, we have to really struggle to get good care and take care of ourselves.

"I've been in this field for over 30 years. When I started working, I never had to pay for health care. Nowadays, even though you are making more, you have to pay more for health care, which basically means you're on the same point where you started. And with inflation, it means we're always on the lower level, and that's the reason why we are fighting and I think it's these basic things health care workers [more broadly] are facing. I don't know if all of them are facing the same

issues, but it looks like that's been going on.

"It is exactly guided by profit.

"Even though health care benefits are very expensive, we also have to have a choice of where we go for better health benefits. We are being told this is the only [health plan] you're getting, and it's not the best. What do you think for us when we get sick? We should expect to go anywhere we want to go."

Richarde added, "We want to [be able to] go to other places and have other doctors. They want you to take in-network doctors [from Prime], but nobody wants to sign with them, they're so bad. So now what are we going to do? Stay to die?! I'll look for another doctor. I don't mind paying a percentage, but you tell me zero? I have [to pay] \$2,000 for my glasses and my physical. It's like I don't have insurance!"

Richarde also showed our reporters an allergic skin reaction she got on her face to the masks Saint Michael's provided her at the start of the pandemic, and recounted how Prime called her a year after she initially reported it and did nothing for her.

When a WSWs reporter noted that the billionaire class enormously enriched themselves during the pandemic, while health care workers have been on the front lines, Richarde said, "Yes—They profit on us!"

Michel spoke to the WSWs about the recent victimization and scapegoating of former Tennessee nurse RaDonda Vaught for a medication error that led to a patient's death. "When you're trying to rush people, you're short-staffed and everything, trying to get more with less, so it's never safe and look what happened. Now they're not going to really support her. They're just going to blame her for the mistake. No matter how short-staffed you are, you cannot do the work of four people or two people and expect to get good results."



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