Striking health care workers in Newark, New Jersey reject austerity proposal from management

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On Thursday evening, striking health care workers at Saint Michael's Medical Center in Newark, New Jersey overwhelmingly rejected a final offer from management that would have imposed harsh austerity on hospital staff who have made great sacrifices throughout the pandemic. The rejection is a sign of workers' growing militancy and anger at the profit-driven health care system.

Saint Michael's Medical Center is owned by California-based Prime Healthcare. Workers at the hospital have been on strike since May 23 over low pay, substandard health benefits, understaffing and other grievances. The company's "last, best and final offer" this week was nothing less than an open declaration of war on workers' standard of living.

As the rate of inflation reached a 40-year high of 8.6 percent, Prime offered workers annual raises of just 2.2 percent during the proposed three-year contract. This offer would represent a cut in workers' real wages. Furthermore, the company proposed a health benefits plan with a huge deductible payment. The plan also would require workers to arrange for out-of-network physicians to treat them on the premises of Saint Michael's.

Prime's offer was met with justified disgust and anger by the health care workers.

"None of us was surprised, but all of us were disgusted by their offer," a striking worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "They offered something like a quarter of what we asked for with regard to pensions. So, we'll be back out on the picket line tomorrow morning."

Workers called the offer disrespectful and pointed to the gulf between the terms that Prime proposed and the value of their labor. "The people were so disgusted, you could tell it wasn't gonna pass," said the worker.

Prime's offer makes clear that the company is determined to impose austerity on the workers. But workers at Saint Michael's Medical Center are equally determined to not accept this. However, to wage their struggle successfully, workers cannot rely on the union.

The Saint Michael's workers are members of the Jersey Nurses Economic Security Organization (JNESO). Trying to present itself as militant, the union called the company's offer "crappy" in a Facebook post.

But its own demand of a 6 percent raise each year would also amount to austerity for workers, who have risked their health and worked long hours during the pandemic. Moreover, JNESO is not paying workers strike pay, nor has it called out its members at other hospitals (or any other health care workers) in support of the Newark strike. The union is attempting to wear workers down and prepare them for a defeat.

JNESO is also attempting to subordinate the striking workers to the Democratic Party. At a public rally that the union held on Monday, June 6, New Jersey Assemblyman and Deputy Majority Leader Thomas P. Giblin appeared. Giblin has been a Democratic Party operative since 1977 and has held various elected offices and influential positions within the party. He also is the business manager of the International Union of Operating Engineers, a large construction industry union of which JNESO is a district council. In 2006, federal officials, including investigators from the U.S. Department of Labor, raided Giblin's office and seized documents and data as part of an undisclosed investigation.

JNESO also supported the reelection of Democratic Governor Phil Murphy, a multimillionaire and former Goldman Sachs executive, last year. Murphy has presided over 33,831 pandemic-related deaths in New Jersey, according to figures compiled by Worldometer. The state has the seventh-highest number of pandemic-related deaths per million population in the country. This horrific

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death toll—on top of an estimated 600,000 people who now suffer from Long COVID in New Jersey—was entirely preventable. It was the direct result of the Democratic Party's conscious prioritization of corporate share values over human life.

It is also the Democratic Party that bears primary responsibility for the catastrophic state of health care and hospitals, including the many closures of hospitals in Newark, one of the poorest big cities in the country. Throughout the pandemic, supplies of personal protective equipment have been chronically inadequate, and workers have been forced to buy or improvise their own supplies. Understaffing across the country has promoted overwork and extraordinary levels of burnout among nurses, 90 percent of whom are thinking of leaving the profession. In addition to the physical strain, nurses have faced the emotional trauma resulting from successive waves of mass infection and death.

In the courageous struggle of Newark health care workers, much more is at stake than just a struggle against Prime for better working and living conditions. Workers are confronted with the brutal reality of a health care system in which everything, including the lives of workers and patients and even public health itself, is subordinated to the accumulation of profits for the corporate and financial elite. Now, the very companies that have reaped record profits during the pandemic are seeking to impose austerity on the workers that have sacrificed their lives and health to save patients.

Health care workers at Saint Michael's must not allow their struggle to be isolated and defeated by the union. There is a powerful basis for expanding the strike by appealing for the broadest possible support from the working class. Such a step would find powerful support within the working class, which has begun to launch a counter-offensive against the rapidly rising cost of living, austerity and war.

In New York City, several workers have voiced their support for the Newark strike. "This action shows courage, principle and willingness to fight," said Lisa, a nurse in New York City, to the *World Socialist Web Site*. "The hospital corporate flunkeys always say they don't have money for working staff. There are big bonuses for CEOs, while we all work ourselves to the bone."

"Solidarity with the heroic Saint Michael's health care workers in their struggle to address understaffing, overwork, and a meager 2 percent raise in the midst of a historic, deadly pandemic!" said Joshua H, an educator in New York state. "You sacrifice so much for the sake of others, and a for-profit health care system wants to take even more. Together, you can win!"

A powerful movement of health care workers internationally is emerging. In recent weeks, strikes or protests have occurred in Florida, Minnesota and California. New struggles are on the horizon for health care workers in Michigan, New York and Washington. This movement is by no means confined to the United States. Health care workers in France, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Spain and Germany also have struck in recent weeks, and health care workers in Sri Lanka have been at the forefront of mass social protests against the Sri Lankan government.

In a recent statement on this global movement of health care workers, the WSWS stressed, "The global movement of health care workers is part of a growing movement of the working class against social inequality, austerity and war. A central aim of this movement must be the fight to take profit out of medicine and the establishment of a socialist system, democratically controlled by health care workers and committed to the provision of high quality medical care as a basic social right for all."

Such a fight requires new, independent organizations. It cannot be successful if it is confined within the trade unions or subordinated to the capitalist Democratic Party. Health care workers in the US have set up a steering committee to coordinate the establishment of rank-and-file committees at health care facilities across the country.

We urge health care workers at Saint Michael's Medical Center to contact us to share their experiences with the *WSWS Health Care Workers Newsletter* and discuss the establishment of an independent rank-and-file committee.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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