

“I’m ready to strike”

3,000 Palomar Health nurses and caregivers in San Diego overwhelmingly authorize strike

Linda Rios
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The Steering Committee of Rank-and-File Nurses, with the assistance of the World Socialist Website Healthcare Workers Newsletter, will be meeting this Sunday, June 12, at 11:00 a.m. Pacific/2:00 p.m. Eastern Time. We warmly invite all Palomar Health nurses and health care workers everywhere to register and join this important meeting.

Three thousand nurses and caregivers at Palomar Health in San Diego North County voted by 96 percent to authorize strike action, the California Nurses Association (CNA) and the Caregivers and Healthcare Employees Union (CHEU) announced Thursday. The health care workers have been kept on the job since their contract expired in March. Negotiations have been ongoing between the unions and the hospital since last April.

In spite of the overwhelming vote, the CNA and CHEU have not set a strike date. “No strike date has been set at this time,” reports National Nurses United on its website. It continues, “[s]hould the bargaining team decide to move forward with a strike, nurses and caregivers will provide Palomar Health and the public 10 days’ advance notice.”

The unions, working in coordination with the hospital chains and political establishment as a whole, are seeking to drag out this process as long as possible and obscure the fundamental issues. In April, the CNA and CHEU held a “Speak Out” in which they advanced the narrative that poor conditions in the hospital were due to racism, with one union steward commenting, “This is the most hostile and racist and most anti-union, anti-work administration I’ve ever worked with.”

The reality is that hospitals across the country are chronically short staffed due the profit interests which

dominate the entire health care system. Nurses and health care workers of all races and genders face daily abuse and exploitation, prompting thousands to exit the profession every month.

Last November, nurses picketed in opposition to layoffs, the outsourcing of jobs to other facilities, the hospital’s application for state waivers on mandated staff-to-patient ratios and other demands. Nurses are also fighting for a significant increase in wages due to skyrocketing inflation.

Health care staff at the Escondido hospital campus told the *World Socialist Web Site* that conditions are increasingly untenable and that the terrible working conditions have been compounded by the pandemic. Many noted that turnover was incredibly high and that the morale of workers was suffering greatly.

While many nurses saw no point in the union’s toothless “Speak Out,” many agreed they were “ready to strike.”

The short staffing has had tragic consequences. Recently, a patient committed suicide by jumping from a sixth-story balcony. The patient was under 24-hour supervision, a common behavioral health intervention when there is increased risk of injury or harm to self or others. However, the hospital claims that the patient managed to “elude” the caregiver and find his way to a balcony. No further details have been revealed by the hospital or any of the local media outlets, and many are questioning to what extent the patient was given a private supervision staff.

This mirrors a similar tragedy at Florida’s Orlando Regional Medical Center, where patient Richard St. Onge, 43, also committed suicide when he was left without adequate supervision. St. Onge, whose

psychiatric medication had been changed and left without supervision, used a bedside table to break the window of his room on the eighth floor and plunged to his death. His body was not discovered for hours. Dozens of nurses later walked out of the hospital in protest over low staffing levels, which led to St. Onge's death.

The California Nurses Association and the Caregivers and Healthcare Employees Union are both affiliates of National Nurses United, which has over 175,000 members nationwide. The California Nurses Association alone has nearly \$400 million in assets. However, these funds are squandered on the salaries of union executives who make \$280,000 salaries or more, and millions of dollars are donated to the political campaigns and lobbying efforts for Democratic politicians.

It was the so-called "progressive" Governor Gavin Newsom who threw out patient ratios throughout the pandemic, and despite being on the books, California's patient ratios are broken every day at almost every hospital. This is a process rubber-stamped by the trade unions, which offer endless piles of Assignment Despite Objection (ADO) forms but stand by idly as lean staffing models are imposed on nurses.

Within the past year, the nurses unions have enforced betrayals upon tens of thousands of health care workers. The most notorious was at Kaiser Permanente, where a coalition of unions canceled a statewide strike and forced through a sellout contract, which exchanged wage increases of only 2 or 3 percent for tens of millions of dollars in corporate funding for the unions through the Kaiser Permanente Labor-Management Partnership. To fight the union's betrayal, nurses across the Kaiser system founded the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee.

Nurses and other health care workers at Palomar Health and across the country must form their own rank-and-file committees to fight against the subordination of the health care system to profit and the pro-management unions. Nurses around the country have founded the Steering Committee of Rank-and-File Nurses to unite the struggles at hospitals across the country, both union and non-union, and to help build a network of committees as independent organs of struggle.

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