

Letter from a nurse at Providence St. Vincent: “Myself and many of my colleagues will be voting no on June 20th”

A nurse
15 June 2022

The World Socialist Web Site received the following letter from a nurse at the Providence St. Vincent Medical Center outside of Portland, Oregon. The hospital’s 1,600 nurses have been working without a contract for six months against demands by management to accept low pay, continuing staffing shortages, a lack of hazard pay and insultingly low benefits.

The Oregon Nurses Association (ONA) has worked overtime in an attempt to force through a sellout contract. The union announced a tentative agreement on June 4 that accepts the basic demands of the company, including wage increases lower than inflation, no retroactive pay, little to no additional paid time off, and reduced benefits. The tentative agreement brought to nurses by the ONA also does not address the hospital’s staffing crisis.

The letter expresses the outrage of nurses at both management and the union for presenting the sellout agreement to the membership. It also makes clear that the only genuine way forward is through the formation of a Providence Nurses Rank-and-File Committee to elaborate 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.

We invite other nurses at Providence St. Vincent and across the country to write to us about the conditions they face as a result of the ongoing social crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

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The Providence St. Vincent tentative agreement is horrible. In 20 years of contracts at St. Vincent,

retroactive pay has always been included in the contract. It was not included in the tentative agreement. Instead, they offered a measly bonus that will be heavily taxed and then divided it up into two parts in hopes that the nurses won’t all get the bonus and immediately quit, should this bad contract be ratified.

After over a year of virtue signaling about diversity and equity and how it was so important to Providence that they finally recognize Martin Luther King Day as an official holiday, it’s not even listed in the tentative agreement as an official recognized holiday (Article VI, section A). MLK Day is a footnote stating that if you work that day, you get paid time and a half, but if that happens to be your regular day off, you don’t get the accompanying use of a holiday to utilize 30 days before or after the holiday. It’s almost like Providence doesn’t really consider it a real holiday.

In Article XIV—Professional Development, section D, the union fought to get nurses money for continuing education purposes. The tentative agreement now shows the addition that we will only be reimbursed money “in accordance with organizational standards for business travel.” These organizational standards for business travel are covered in Policy Stat ID #8684883, and are meant for executive business travel on behalf of Providence. They include requirements for use of a specific travel site and application for and use of the Providence American Express card for all expenses.

Not a single staff nurse has ever been asked to utilize this policy before Chief Nursing Officer Tina Mammone demanded it while going through contract negotiations at the end of last year. The language in this section now expressly forbids getting reimbursement for breakfast, lunch or dinner for any remote course

work done because we should have food at home and should not have a need to order out. Providence really just wants to pinch pennies and limit us on how much reimbursement we can take so that they can keep making money.

There is no language in the contract that includes training time for all nurses on how to follow this business travel policy. Providence won't agree to increase the accrual rates for Paid Time Off/Vacation time. They want to pawn off a single PTO/Vacation dump of 20 hours as good enough when Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) and Kaiser Permanente offer higher accrual rates. The wage increases proposed would still leave many nurses below rates of OHSU and Kaiser contracts.

Providence still doesn't recognize or pay an increased wage for those registered nurses who have a bachelor's degree. OHSU pays those with higher degrees more per hour, and Legacy Health gives a year-end bonus for those with higher degrees based on how many hours they worked during the year. The tentative agreement doesn't address health care costs, lower deductibles and out-of-pocket maximums. In fact, the tentative agreement specifically states that Providence can raise our health insurance premiums by approximately 7 percent in 2023 and by 8 percent in 2024.

Overall, I and many of my colleagues will be voting no on June 20th.



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