

Saint Michael's health care workers' strike in Newark, New Jersey at crossroads

WSWS Health Care Workers Newsletter

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The strike of more than 300 nurses and other health care workers at St. Michael's Medical Center in Newark, New Jersey has reached a critical turning point. Together with hospital management and a federal mediator, the Jersey Nurses Economic Security Organization (JNESO) union is conspiring to shut down the strike before workers can win their demands.

Over the past several days, union officials and St. Michael's management (which acts on behalf of Prime Healthcare, the hospital's owner) have been meeting under the aegis of a federal mediator. At a June 17 meeting, the three parties discussed a new offer from management.

In an email to the members, JNESO said the offer would be reviewed by union executives and a tentative agreement could be finalized as soon as Monday, June 20. A ratification vote could be organized as quickly as two days later on Wednesday, June 22.

The email did not include any details about management's latest offer. The reason is clear: Prime Healthcare has no intention to retreat and is determined to force workers to swallow below-inflation-rate wages, continued understaffing and other concessions in medical coverage.

The company's previous "last, best and final" offer included a 2.2 percent raise for each year of the three-year contract. This would result in a deep cut in real wages, given the four-decade high inflation rate of 8.6 percent. The company also proposed a health plan that would have imposed a high deductible and a requirement for workers to persuade out-of-network physicians to treat them on the premises of St. Michael's.

Workers decisively rejected this austerity proposal. But the reaction of the union to this militant stand was not to intensify the fight against Prime Healthcare. On

the contrary, JNESO came back with a counterproposal for a 6 percent raise in each year of the contract, more than 2.5 percent below the rate of inflation.

It is now clear that the "compromise" being worked out between management, the mediator and the union will be somewhere between management's provocative last offer and the wholly inadequate counterproposal by JNESO. But St. Michael's health care workers have not suffered throughout the pandemic and stood on the picket line and sacrificed their wages for nearly a month for some rotten deal that betrays their interests.

If workers are to prevail in this battle, the rank and file must take the conduct of the negotiation and the struggle into their own hands. Workers should elect a rank-and-file strike committee, made up of the most militant and class conscious workers, to take up this fight.

This committee must immediately organize workers to prevent the a sellout of the struggle and defeat the efforts by the union, the mediator, management and the news media to browbeat workers into submission.

First of all, no contract should even be brought to a vote before the membership has received the full document, including all side letters of agreement, and a full week to study and discuss it. After all, this agreement will determine our conditions for the next three years.

Second, workers should not ratify any agreement unless it includes the following demands:

- **??An inflation-busting 20 percent pay rise! No to austerity!** Any agreement must not only keep pace with inflation and the rising cost of goods, it must provide a significant raise to restore previous cuts and to compensate workers for the sacrifices they have made during the pandemic.

- **Immediate hiring of staff and enforceable**

staffing ratios! Any agreement must ensure safe staffing, adequate supplies of medical equipment and sufficient breaks and time off so that workers can provide patients with the best possible care.

- **Full high-quality employer-paid healthcare!**

Healthcare workers, who carry out lifesaving work on the frontlines of the pandemic, must have access to the highest-quality free coverage.

The claim that there is “no money” to meet these elemental demands is a lie. Prime Healthcare is a privately owned for-profit company that owns 42 hospitals in 14 states. It has revenues of over \$3 billion and was named “the Fastest Growing Hospital System” in the country by *Modern Healthcare*. Its executives and investors get huge payouts from buying up “distressed hospitals” and cutting costs. Despite its long criminal record of defrauding federal health programs, the Congress handed Prime Healthcare millions in COVID relief grants and loans.

And it is not just a matter of one employer. The federal government, whose mediator is demanding health care workers “tighten their belts,” is spending trillions on war, including \$80,000 *every minute* on nuclear weapons that could wipe out the entire planet.

All across the country and the world, health care workers are coming into huge battles over precisely the same issues at St. Michael’s workers. This includes upcoming contract struggles in upstate New York, Michigan, California, Oregon and other states. From Germany to Turkey and Sri Lanka, health care workers are fighting against austerity, intolerable working conditions, the continued pandemic and the subordination of public health to private profit.

This is the social force that St. Michael’s workers must turn to for support. This means repudiating JNESO’s bankrupt “strategy” of appealing to Democrats like Larry Hamm, Governor Phil Murphy and Senator Bernie Sanders. Biden and the Democratic Party defend the same for-profit health system as the Republicans. The Democratic president who claimed he would “follow the science” has abandoned any fight against the spread of COVID-19 and fully adopted Trump’s “let it rip” policy.

Workers have the power to win this strike. But this requires a radical change in the orientation and leadership of this struggle. Nurses across the US have taken the first step in forming independent

organizations by founding a national health care workers steering committee, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

If new, far more democratic forms of organization are created, workers can transform this strike into a powerful industrial and political counteroffensive for all health care workers. The giant hospital chains, pharmaceuticals, insurance and medical equipment makers must be transformed into public utilities, under the democratic control of health care workers themselves. Only in this can profit be taken out of medicine and high-quality health care provided to all as a social right.

The *World Socialist Web Site Health Care Worker Newsletter* will do everything to assist in the building of an independent strike committee at St. Michael’s. Contact us today on the form below to discuss the next steps.



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