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Vote NO on the Providence St. Vincent sellout contract! Build rank-and-file committees to fight for safe staffing, good wages and benefits!

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19 June 2022

Are you a nurse at Providence St. Vincent? Let us know what you think about the contract and what health care workers should be fighting for. Please also register for the upcoming Health Care Workers Rank-and-File Committee meeting this coming Sunday, June 26, at 11:00 a.m. Pacific Time.

Nurses at the Providence St. Vincent Medical Center outside of Portland, Oregon, will be voting on a tentative agreement from Monday through Thursday, June 20-23. The proposal was brought to the hospital’s 1,600 nurses by the Oregon Nurses Association (ONA), which endorsed the deal that would worsen cuts to real wages, erode benefits and maintain dangerous understaffing and unbearable working conditions.

Nurses have already begun to speak out, calling for an overwhelming “No” vote against the contract. The WSWS recently published a powerful statement from a Providence St. Vincent nurse calling on her colleagues to reject this pro-company deal.

The *World Socialist Web Site* Health Care Workers Newsletter also urges nurses to vote “No.” As important as this is, however, this must only be the beginning. The campaign to defeat this deal should be combined with the building of an independent rank-and-file committee, made up of the most militant and class-conscious nurses, to outline and fight for the demands that Providence St. Vincent workers and their families need.

The entire field of nursing is under attack. Providence nurses must unite with other health care workers in the region and join the growing international movement of health care workers. Across the US and across the world, health care workers are fighting low pay, understaffing and the subordination of human life to corporate profit, which has proven so disastrous in the

pandemic.

One Providence nurse described to the WSWS the agreement the ONA has put before workers as “horrible.” There is no provision for retroactive pay, which has been included in all past contracts, and no funds for nurses’ continuing education as they keep up to date with the latest medical advances. There are only meager increases in paid time off, which is necessary for nurses to recuperate from physically and mentally taxing work schedules. She said, “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.”

Another nurse commented, “Everybody is very angry about the fact that this was even brought to us and [that the ONA] recommended that we accept it.”

The raises contained in the proposal do not keep up with health care costs, much less record-high inflation, which has hit 8.6 percent and higher for fuel, food and other critical living expenses. The contract calls for a 4.6 percent annual pay increase over three years, an effective *pay cut* of nearly 15 percent given current inflation. Even the union’s initial demand of 6.7 percent increase each year would have resulted in a large deduction of real wages for nurses at St. Vincent.

Finally, the contract does next to nothing to address the staffing crisis, which is the biggest issue facing health care workers due to the associated unsafe conditions for patients and high-stress workloads for staff. These conditions, which have existed for years, have been exacerbated by the criminal response of the corporate and political establishment to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

At best, the ONA promises “improved staffing language” that

will use “the criteria for unit staffing in Oregon’s RN staffing law and enhances Providence’s commitment to daily nurse staffing.” In reality, such contract language changes nothing. Providence is already required to meet such criteria set by Oregon’s laws, which are routinely violated by the hospital monopolies. Providence and the ONA have said that they will set up yet another do-nothing committee “to address safe staffing.” As one nurse put it, the proposal “doesn’t mean anything.”

The contract must be rejected. A “No” vote on the tentative agreement must be the starting point for nurses and health care workers to initiate a counteroffensive for a sharp increase in wages, written mandates for safe staffing and improved workplace conditions overseen by rank-and-file committees and enforceable through the collective action of health care workers. There should also be a large expansion of paid time off and retroactive pay to prevent burnout.

A Providence Nurses Rank-and-File Committee should be formed to draw up a list of comprehensive demands for workers, including an inflation-busting 20 percent immediate pay raise and Cost-of-Living Adjustments (COLA) indexed to rising living expenses. Nurses should prepare to fight for these demands, including setting out a timeline and plan for a strike.

A strike would generate powerful support throughout the working class. If this contract is rejected, it will be the first time at St. Vincent. A strike would also be a first for the hospital. A walkout would galvanize nurses at other hospitals and broader sections of workers, including educators, railroad workers, dockworkers, autoworkers and others, as they see yet another section of the working class fighting for their rights and needs.

No confidence can be placed in the ONA or the trade unions in general to carry out such a struggle. The unions are in bed with the health care executives and Democratic Party politicians who defend the system of for-profit medicine.

When nurses voted overwhelmingly on May 4 to authorize a strike, the ONA did not set a strike date but continued to drag out behind-the-scenes talks with the hospital. After workers voted to authorize a strike, the ONA pledged to give hospital executives more than enough time to hire strikebreakers, declaring, “If and when a strike is called, ONA will give Providence a 10-day notice to allow Providence management adequate time to stop admissions and transfer patients or to reach a fair agreement with nurses and avert a work stoppage.”

In other words, the union is not out to win the struggle of nurses but focused on protecting the private profits of Providence and its corporate board.

Nor has the union called for a broader struggle among nurses in the region. Health care workers at Kaiser and Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU), as well as at other Providence facilities nationwide, are the natural and strongest allies of the St. Vincent nurses. And yet when 400 fellow nurses at Providence Willamette Falls and Milwaukie unanimously authorized a strike on June 3, the ONA immediately announced

a sellout agreement that abandoned the struggle against short staffing.

The isolation of nurses from their sisters and brothers must be broken! Instead of separate contracts with individual hospitals, which atomizes the power of nurses in struggle, a Providence Nurses Rank-and-File Committee would seek to bring together nurses and all health care workers in a common fight to provide the necessary resources for decent standards of living and proper patient care.

The committee would also reach out to other sections of the working class, explaining that a strike by nurses is a fight against unsafe health care practices, which endanger workers’ lives when seeking medical care. “The medication shortage is really bad at the moment, really,” one nurse told the WSWS. “Having to substitute something … can be toxic.”

A key part of the fight must also be to educate workers on the ongoing dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic. Health care workers have faced death and devastation wrought by the pandemic head on, caring for patients dying of a preventable disease. They have also been among the most impacted by the pathogen: Estimates from the United Nations last October indicated that up to 180,000 health care workers worldwide have died of the pandemic. No doubt tens of thousands have died since then during the onslaught of the waves of the Omicron variant and its many subvariants.

Nurses and health care workers must take a stand! Workers everywhere have had enough of eroded living standards, unbearable working conditions and mass death as corporate profits soar sky high. Strikes have taken place across the United States and internationally, from health care workers in Turkey and teachers in Oakland to transport workers in Spain and a general strike in Sri Lanka. They are all protesting and fighting against the same basic issues—a fight against a society designed around the accumulation of private profit, a fight against capitalism.

The only way forward in these struggles is through the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions and Democrats, to outline a common strategy to fight for workers’ demands and to win the broadest possible support for the struggle.

The WSWS will provide every assistance possible in helping to establish and organize these committees. We call on all Providence St. Vincent nurses and health care workers to register to join the next Nurses Rank-and-File Steering Committee meeting on Sunday, June 26, at 11:00 a.m. Pacific Time. To discuss forming a committee, fill out the form below:



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