

Union shuts down New Jersey hospital walkout before Nevada Prime Healthcare workers strike

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Are you a health care worker at Saint Michael's in Newark or Saint Mary's Medical Center in Nevada? We want to hear from you! Contact the WSWS Health Care Worker Newsletter to share your experience and discuss the next steps forward. Join the meeting of the US health care workers' steering committee on Sunday at 2 PM. (Register here)

On Wednesday, the nurses union at Saint Michael's hospital in Newark, New Jersey rammed through a sellout contract after the fifth week of the strike by 350 nurses and technical engineers. The snap vote by the Jersey Nurses Economic Security Organization (JNESO) was organized just before 500 nurses at another Prime Healthcare Service-owned facility in Nevada began a one-day strike on Thursday.

In the face of this growing militancy by health care workers across the US and internationally, the union was determined to block a joint strike against the giant health care company.

Late Wednesday night, the union announced that members had "voted to accept the tentative agreement!" The union did not publish the actual results of the vote, which raises whether its claims are even legitimate.

The tentative agreement was prepared by management, the union and a federal mediator in secret, behind the backs of striking workers. On Monday, without disclosing any details of the deal, the union suddenly announced it reached an "agreement" and told workers they would have to vote on it two days later.

In a clear indication that it was conspiring with the union to trample over the will of workers and shut down the strike, the company contacted workers on Monday to ask about their availability to work, starting today.

All the while, JNESO was seeking to starve workers into submission by refusing to pay them strike benefits.

JNESO is an affiliate of the International Union of Operating Engineers (OE), AFL-CIO, which has assets of \$342,947,286, according to its filing with the US Labor Department. The OE only paid out \$270,900 in strike benefits in all of 2021. This is a tad more than half of what it paid to just one union executive, President James Callahan, who pocketed \$502,384.

"I think a lot of nurses and technicians are questioning what the union has been doing," one worker told the WSWS ahead of the vote. "Everyone is very stressed because we are being told that our applications for unemployment benefits are being 'reviewed' for 4-5 weeks. So, no strike pay and no unemployment benefits."

Not a single worker ever saw the agreement. The vote was held on the second floor of a pub in Newark in a setting that resembled a Mafia hideout more than anything else. Health care workers, used to making critical, sometimes lifesaving decisions, on a daily basis, were shepherded into a small, packed room, where they were bullied into voting for the deal.

Inside, no COVID mitigation measures were taken and union officials ran around without masks. Workers had to listen to a speaker who presented an almost incomprehensible Powerpoint presentation. Even inside the meeting, workers were still not given a copy of the agreement to read. The presentations were organized in two shifts so as to prevent workers from speaking with one another and congregating.

Well aware of the opposition among workers, the JNESO union and the Operating Engineers, an organization notorious for its decades-long ties to the mob, mobilized thugs to intimidate workers. In an attack on the democratic rights of all striking workers, one of these thugs assaulted a WSWS reporting team handing out leaflets at a considerable distance from the voting

location.

Holding leaflets he had snatched from the hands of workers at the front door, the goon shoved a WSWS reporter against a wall shouting, “Get the F— out of here.”

Striking workers were outraged by the unprovoked attack. One commented, “Personally I think they don’t like the questions you’re asking because that then leads people to ask: ‘Wait a minute, what is going on here?’ And people have been reading these articles.”

The worker explained the contract terms, which constitute an unequivocal assault on workers’ living standards. It includes a 3 percent raise per year for three years. This is less than 1 percent more than the 2.2 percent yearly increase workers resoundingly rejected 10 days ago.

Health insurance, one of the main concerns of the workers, was, in the words of the worker, “ridiculous.” Any procedures would still have to be done through the substandard system offered by Saint Michaels, and workers would have to pay a massive \$5,700 deductible, along with high co-pays.

The union effectively told the workers they were not going to get anything better. “They said, ‘This is a much better deal [than the last offer by management], and we’re looking at each other, thinking this is bull. The undercurrent I felt was that many said to themselves, ‘I’m not just going to say yes to this.’”

“A lot of the critical care nurses were not very happy about it; quite a few of them probably said no.

“One of the big things was that you can only see your oncologist twice a year. Quite a few of the women I’ve worked with have had cancers so they all actively go to oncologists.

“One woman who is working at the hospital per diem told me, ‘I’m here to support the girls that I work with, my vote will go the way theirs go.’ When she asked them, ‘How are you voting?’ and they said no, so she went in and voted no. I personally voted no too.”

In spite of systematic scabbing, organized by management, and the union’s efforts to starve them into submission by withholding strike pay, Saint Michael’s workers have shown great militancy and determination to win their demands for decent health care coverage, wage increases to make up for inflation, and adequate staffing ratios throughout the strike.

The coverage of the *World Socialist Web Site*, including an exposure of the criminal record of Prime Health Services, a \$3 billion company that owns the hospital, has found a wide readership among the striking workers.

The struggle at Saint Michael’s has only begun. None of the issues confronting health care workers there have been resolved, and none of them are limited to that hospital.

But the next steps in the fight must proceed in opposition to and independently of the union bureaucracy. This means building rank-and-file committees to challenge the company-union conspiracy and assert the interests of workers in the hospital. These committees should establish direct lines of communication with hospital workers in Nevada, across Prime Healthcare and all other companies.

This must be combined with a fight to take profit out of medicine. 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 high-quality health care be provided to all as a social right.

Workers at Saint Michael’s are not alone. Their struggle is part of a growing global movement by the working class in opposition to intolerable working and living conditions, austerity and war. Health care workers have been engaging in major strikes across the US, Turkey and Germany, and in Britain, rail workers have launched a series of nationwide strikes, bringing the country’s transit system to a halt. Contracts for thousands of health care workers in Buffalo, New York and Ann Arbor, Michigan are expiring on June 30 and thousands of other nurses in Minnesota and California are also facing contract battles.

The International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is providing the framework for the formation of a network of independent committees by workers around the world. Health care workers in the US have taken a first step by creating a steering committee to coordinate their struggles, which will meet on Sunday at 2:00 p.m. We encourage workers from Saint Michael’s to join that meeting to discuss with health care workers around the country the next steps forward.



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