"I fully support the workers taking a stand to ask for better treatment"

Health care workers at Providence St. Vincent oppose efforts by Oregon Nurses Association to sabotage scheduled strike

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Nurses at Providence St. Vincent Medical Center outside of Portland, Oregon, remain in the dark about the status of their planned strike after last week's announcement of a new tentative agreement reached by the Oregon Nurses Association (ONA) and Providence executives. The strike was scheduled for July 11 after nurses voted down a sellout contract by a margin of more than 4 to 1, a clear indication by the rank and file that they are ready for a fight for better wages, benefits and working conditions.

Rather than preparing its membership for a battle, the ONA immediately went back to the bargaining table in an attempt to secure a second tentative agreement to head off a strike. After what the ONA called a "historic" bargaining session on June 27, it announced a new TA on June 30. It has not, however, released the full contract but rather a series of highlights of the new agreement. The ONA has promoted them as "NURSE WINS," all of which are at best baseline items from previous contracts and which do not address the demands for wage increases above inflation, drastically reduced health care costs and better nurse-to-patient staffing ratios.

St. Vincent nurses and other health care workers spoke to the WSWS about the conditions they face in the hospital and the role the ONA has played in suppressing a broader fight by health care workers at the hospital and across the region.

One Providence registered nurse (RN) insisted that "when a union rep told nurses they should vote 'Yes' on the tentative agreement, nurses were angered and wanted to know the details of the proposed contract. When the rep was directly asked why St. Vincent workers should accept the agreement, he said that 'this is just how it goes with the union.'" He further explained that "nurses are getting the latest news about negotiations from flyers the union hands out after they privately discuss with Providence management, and concerned nurses swarm the union rep to get the news." The ONA also told this RN that "Providence told us they would not talk about health care until 2023."

The nurse also shared a survey from the ONA with the WSWS which was sent out after the original tentative agreement was voted down. In it, nurses were asked to rank their demands, i.e., to determine which ones should be sacrificed first. But there is more than enough money to meet all of the nurses' demands; the RN pointed out that "the amount of money these hospital CEOs are making should be illegal!" Providence made $5.3 billion in revenue in 2021.

There is also broad frustration with the ONA for not calling a strike earlier. "The union is dragging out the process to go on strike. My coworkers know that the union will drag out this process." The RN also noted that "the Stanford nurses strike only lasted a week because their union ended it."

The RN also spoke on the conditions nurses at St. Vincent face. "One of the biggest issues is wages. We are paid less than workers at other hospitals. … We pretty much don't have health care. Nurses who have

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health insurance in the network are paying out of pocket until costs are over $3,000." As to a nurse who recently became a parent, they decided to pay for private insurance because "private pregnancy insurance is cheaper than what Providence is offering.

"Staffing levels are [also] an ongoing issue. We have a buddy system. If your co-worker is on a lunch break, then you take on their patients and have 10 patients instead of five." Nurses, who should not have to take on patients, now must do so: "The charge nurse is not supposed to take on patients, but when our unit is maxed out, then the charge nurse has had to take on patients."

A St. Vincent patient care technician offered his support for the nurses. "If I'm being honest, I don't know a whole lot about the demands being made or the contracts being offered, but I know the nurses are asking for things that will benefit the hospital and how the staff are treated; and the contracts being offered aren't providing those things. I fully support the workers taking a stand to ask for better treatment. If the strike is the only way they'll be taken seriously, then I support them 100 percent."

Sam, a pseudonym for another St. Vincent RN, provided further details on the horrible working conditions at the hospital.

"The nurses, at least in my unit, have dealt with short staffing, lack of both PPE and patient care supplies. We have been covering each other's lunches, sometimes leaving a nurse to care for up to 10 patients during that time frame. [It is] not overly hard most of the time, but on some units such as the cardiac units, where that might leave you managing multiple medication drips and needing to respond to an emergency, leaves other patients without the attention they are due. [The patients are] never in danger, but [our work cannot be] as thoughtful and purposeful as it should be."

Sam also addressed overwork, noting that "We have been denied time off requests and receive near daily phone calls or messages to pick up extra. The hospital has offered greater pay for some emergency shifts but put so many stipulations on the shift it's easy to lose the bonus by pay day. We are seeking equity in pay and benefits that our colleagues across town receive in the other hospital systems.

"We are seeking an actual commitment to safe staffing ratios and not floating nurses to units where they are not trained to provide care. The hospital keeps advertising a 14 percent pay increase. That sounds impressive, but in reality it puts us at the heels of the other systems, and OHSU (Oregon Health & Science University) will be getting a new contract shortly, putting us squarely behind for a further two years. St. Vincent, through the care of the bedside staff, has received great accolades the past few years being recognized as a top 50 US hospital and magnet status, and is also starting a heart transplant program. Those accolades were in great part achieved due to the care and compassion of nurses."

Nurses are very aware of the hospital's windfall profits, and Sam noted that "publicly available financial information for the hospital shows it has $5.14 billion in its coffers, a mighty rainy day fund for a non-profit. St. Vincent's has committed to donating a huge sum to charitable care. The families of the staff and the staff themselves could use a little good will in this time too. We have shouldered this pandemic and lived the mission, treating the ill and compassionately caring for every person that enters the building, patients and family members. We deserve to be compensated like the top 50 caregivers we are and we are finally willing to stand up for that."

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