

Neptune, N.J.: More than half of JSUMC nurses would not feel safe being treated at their own hospital

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The Health Professionals and Allied Employees (HPAE) Local 5058 union, which represents 1,200 nurses at Jersey Shore University Medical Center (JSUMC) in Neptune, New Jersey, released a position paper Thursday finding that more than half of the over 500 union nurses polled at JSUMC said they wouldn't feel safe being treated at the facility.

The paper, "Hackensack Meridian Health: Profits Before Safe Care?" contains the results of a survey of 512 nurses from a diversity of units, about half of HPAE 5058's membership. Hackensack Meridian Health (HMH) owns JSUMC. Nearly all of the respondents were registered nurses (RNs).

One nurse quoted in the union report writes, "We have operated without a manager for two years. Everyone is so burnt out and these handouts of chocolate bars, a cafeteria voucher, or a petting zoo [are] an insult. We are adults, worthy of dignity and respect and not kindergarteners, dazzled by candy and a puppy."

Another writes, "Over the past three months, we have lost many experienced RNs due to the lack of organization and support the department needs. Morale is beyond poor; it is in the toilet."

These results reflect the deplorable working conditions nurses and other health care workers continue to face across the US. Health care struggles are taking place in Michigan, Minnesota and California and other locations, where workers face the same intentional low staffing, low wages and safety issues faced by JSUMC nurses.

Hackensack Meridian Health is the result of a 2016 merger between Meridian Health and Hackensack University Health. It is the second largest health care

company in New Jersey, with over 36,000 employees. HMH has 568 locations in central and northern New Jersey: 12 acute care hospital locations, one substance use disorder hospital, two children's hospitals, 12 urgent care centers, 332 affiliated physician offices, 18 laboratories and one medical school.

The company has been highly profitable since the merger, with combined profits in the first two years of the pandemic in excess of \$988 million. It also received over \$925 million from CARES Act funding and through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). It is slated to receive an additional \$105 million in ARPA funds in 2023, with \$250,000 going to JSUMC.

The HPAE nurses survey exposes the criminal disregard JSUMC management has for its 1,300 health care workers. A small sampling of the 18 survey questions finds: 54 percent would not feel safe being treated as a patient at JSUMC; 58 percent do not feel safe at JSUMC as a staff member; 79 percent said that morale is low in their clinical area. Seventy-nine percent said hospital management does not do what is necessary to keep staff safe at work.

While workers correctly identify the JSUMC and MHM administration for being responsible for the oppressive conditions at the hospital, the HPAE union's actions, or lack thereof, are also directly to blame. Due to the earlier failures of the HPAE bureaucracy to act on behalf of the rank and file, the issues nurses face have only multiplied.

In 2020, during the first months of the pandemic, HPAE was involved with several overlapping contracts negotiations at three facilities, including JSUMC and Southern Ocean Medical Center—both owned by MHM. The union worked to isolate and betray these struggles

by nurses fighting for PPE and better pay by limiting nurses' actions to symbolic informational pickets, preventing workers at different facilities from waging a united struggle.

These anti-worker tactics resulted in minimal annual wage increases, for JSUMC of 3 percent, 2 percent, and 2.5 percent over three years. The 2020-2023 contract also maintained floating nurses—the reassignment of nurses to a department in which they were not hired to work—and did not guarantee adequate PPE or protections against exposure to COVID infection.

During the 2020 contract negotiations, the WSWs encouraged workers at JSUMC to make the following demands, which retain their validity today:

• Worker control over staffing levels and scheduling to allow for proper treatment for patients and sufficient rest and recuperation for workers;

• The highest quality PPE in sufficient quantities to allow their use in accordance with health and safety standards;

• Immediate recall of all laid-off and furloughed health care workers;

• Full and timely disclosure of information about the spread of the virus in the workforce;

• Regular testing for all workers at no cost and full pay for those who must quarantine after testing positive;

• Free and universal health care of equal quality.

Now halfway through the third year of the pandemic, in the midst of another series of closed door JSUMC contract negotiations—and while inflation hovers at 8 percent—nothing substantial has been done to improve appalling working conditions at the facility. The HPAE bureaucracy bears direct responsibility for the conditions it reports.

Responding to the union's survey findings, HPAE President Debbie White, speaking to NJ Advance Media, can only respond, "This is something we've known, we've heard from our members for a really long time."

HPAE, which have been active since the early 1970s, affiliated with the Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals, the healthcare division of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in 1979.

Today, the AFT is a beacon of anti-worker, pro-war nationalism. Its president, Randi Weingarten is hated by tens of thousands of teachers across the US for isolating and shutting down strikes, forcing students

and teachers back into COVID-19 ridden schools, and promoting anti-scientific pandemic policies.

Nurses as well as all the health care workers at JSUMC are justifiably angry at the conditions they have been subjected to since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and certainly before, and looking for a way to fight. This is a healthy reaction, but HPAE will do nothing but attempt to channel the rank and file's anger into a vote for Democratic Party candidates or make a show of filing another toothless OSHA complaint.

New democratic fighting organizations in the form of rank-and-file committees must be formed independent of the HPAE bureaucratic apparatus. Health care workers at JSUMC can draw inspiration from the campaign by Mack Trucks autoworker Will Lehman who is running as for UAW president. His platform calls for abolishing the UAW bureaucracy, whose members make six-figure salaries while rank-and-file workers suffer outrageous workplace conditions in the form of low salaries, poor plant safety and dangerously long working hours.

In his campaign statement, Lehman says, "My campaign is aimed at spearheading a mass movement of the rank-and-file to break the dictatorship of the apparatus and to transfer power and control over all decision-making processes to the rank-and-file in the auto plants and all work locations."

Teachers, railroad workers, autoworkers as well as health care workers are connecting their struggles through the formation of these rank-and-file committees as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees (IWA-RFC). JSUMC workers interested in joining this fight should contact the WSWs today.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)