

New York state nurses vote overwhelmingly to strike

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More than 17,000 members of the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) have voted by nearly 99 percent to authorize a strike. The nurses, who work at 12 hospitals such as Montefiore, Mount Sinai and NewYork-Presbyterian, have contracts that expire on December 31 and no new agreement for 2023.

The ongoing pandemic, made worse by outbreaks of RSV and influenza, has had a devastating impact on the physical and mental health of New York health care workers, who have been on the front lines of the crisis since its inception. New York City nurses are, in fact, veterans of what became the first epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. Photographs of exhausted nurses wearing plastic garbage bags, due to a criminal lack of proper personal protective equipment (PPE), shocked the world at the time.

Now, nearly three years later, the 42,000 health care workers who constitute the NYSNA rank and file stand among millions of workers worldwide, in all professions, who have been battered by high inflation, staff cuts and overwork brought clearly to light by the horror of the pandemic. The nurses' growing militancy is a reaction to the refusal of the millionaire heads of giant hospital corporations to sacrifice any portion of their profits for the sake of providing their employees with decent wages, benefits and sustainable work hours.

A clear line, however, separates the militant NYSNA rank and file from the bureaucratic apparatus. The role of this apparatus is to stifle and isolate strike actions on behalf of those they in fact serve: the owners. The bureaucrats' treacherous role in recent struggles makes this clear.

In December 2020—at the height of the first year of the pandemic—NYSNA shut down two strikes, one by

2,000 nurses at the Albany Medical Center, and another by 200 nurses at the Montefiore New Rochelle Hospital in Westchester County.

In both cases, nurses demanded adequate staffing levels, greater supplies of reliable PPE and improved wages, benefits and working conditions. The union, however, ended both strikes without achieving any of the nurses' demands.

More recently, on September 7, NYSNA held a rally at Westchester Medical Center, according to their website, to “demand a fair contract that includes safe staffing, fair wages and strong retention plans.” The union has been in contract negotiations with the hospital for over a year.

Rallies of this type, like the ones that the union held at several New York City hospitals in December 2021, serve to temporarily vent the justified anger of nurses and promote local Democratic Party politicians' “solidarity” with workers. NYSNA stages the rallies to buy time to finalize another “win” for nurses, by way of a sellout contract that, like the ones before it, fails to win the “safe staffing, fair wages, and strong retention plans” that the rank and file demand.

NYSNA is hardly alone in perpetrating betrayals like these. In early December, the Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA) announced that its membership had ratified labor agreements for 15,000 nurses across the state. Nurses were prepared to strike at 16 hospitals in Minneapolis, St. Paul and Twin Ports, Minnesota when the MNA announced that it had reached an agreement with Essentia, Allina and other hospital giants. MNA officials called the deal a “historic win” with “unprecedented language to address chronic understaffing.”

The claim proved to be a lie. The agreement provides wage increases of just 17 to 18 percent over the life of

the three-year deal. This ostensible raise amounts to a cut in real income for nurses, given the persistently high rate of inflation, which remains greater than 7 percent nationally.

To address chronic understaffing, the contract specifies that hospital units must first cross a certain threshold of dangerous conditions for nurses and patients alike before “management and the union” will even “re-evaluate staffing levels.” That is, conditions must deteriorate, and nurses and patients suffer, before the problem is even discussed. The contract does not, moreover, prohibit further staff reductions but says that the union must give its blessing to them first.

NYSNA and the MNA share an alliance with the National Nurses United (NNU). NYSNA voted to become officially affiliated with the NNU in October to “mutually grow and strengthen the power of nurses within the state and nationally to advocate for themselves and their patients,” according to the UNA’s website.

Nothing of the sort will happen. The affiliation, which also links the NYSNA to the gangster-ridden AFL–CIO, will serve to strengthen the union’s alliance with the Democratic Party. The party’s pseudo-left wing, headed by Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders who is closely associated with the NNU, is expert at promoting minor reforms with one hand and strangling the opposition of the working class with the other.

Sanders, along with Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) members like New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Minnesota Representative Ilhan Omar, showed their true attitude toward workers when they conspired with Congress and the Biden administration to block the strike by 110,000 railroaders earlier this month. AOC, Omar, Jamaal Bowman and Cori Bush all voted to block the strike and force railroad workers to accept a pro-company contract brokered by the Biden administration that workers had already rejected.

The Democratic Party offers not reforms, but ill health, death and war. President Joe Biden, who promised to end the pandemic and claimed to be the most pro-union president, has overseen the deaths of hundreds of thousands of workers by embracing the Republicans’ “let-it-rip” COVID-19 policy. He and the Democrats in Congress have funneled billions of dollars into NATO’s proxy war against Russia in

Ukraine, ostensibly in the name of defending democracy, while trampling on workers’ right to strike at home.

The rank-and-file nurses of NYSNA must steel themselves for a fight against their enemies. These enemies include not only the major health corporations, but also the parasitic layer of union leadership, who are ever poised to betray those they claim to represent, and the Democratic Party, which is recklessly risking a nuclear third world war. Workers must form rank-and-file committees in every New York hospital to take the decision-making power out of the hands of the apparatus and return it to the hands of the workers, where it belongs.



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