

NYSNA union officials seek to preempt strike with tentative agreement at New York-Presbyterian Hospital

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The New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) leadership announced a tentative agreement with New York-Presbyterian Hospital (NYPH) on January 1. It gave no details about the agreement or the schedule for the ratification vote.

Information released to NYPH workers, however, indicates that the tentative agreement includes a 7 percent raise for 2023. This raise is illusory since inflation was 7.1 percent as of November 2022. Even lower raises of 6 percent and 5 percent are scheduled for the following two years of the contract, which likely means that nurses will continue to fall further behind.

Nurse-to-patient ratios are a major concern for NYPH workers, who were told only that “additional full-time positions” will be added “over the next three years.” How many positions, what they will be and when they will be added were not stated.

NYSNA officials are still in negotiations with the following seven New York hospitals: Montefiore, Mount Sinai Hospital, Mount Sinai Morningside and West, Maimonides, BronxCare, Richmond University Medical Center and Flushing Hospital Medical Center.

The union gave a 10-day strike notice to the eight hospitals on December 30 and announced that a strike of approximately 16,000 nurses would begin on January 9 if a new contract were not negotiated by that date. Before the old contract expired on December 31, approximately 17,000 members of NYSNA who work at 12 hospitals voted by nearly 99 percent to authorize a strike.

NYSNA’s press release regarding NYPH makes a vague statement about delivering “a tentative agreement that will help recruit and retain more nurses for safe patient care and improve conditions for patients.” The 17,000 nurses who voted for a strike demand much more.

Melissa Perleoni, a registered nurse at Mount Sinai, is one of the nurses who voted to strike. She told *News Nation* that cuts to nurses’ health care contributed to the overwhelming

support for a strike. “They want to cut our health care benefits. Can you believe that?” she said. Other factors include dangerously imbalanced nurse-to-patient ratios, poor working conditions and low pay.

Speaking to reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* in front of NYPH, a former nurse said that she fully supported the demands of NYSNA nurses and of health care workers in general. “They need more money. More support staff, and fewer hours. It’s brutal what nurses are going through since COVID,” she said. “Not only that—it shouldn’t only be nurses who are trying to strike right now. All hospital staff are being treated poorly.”

The former nurse then explained who is antagonizing the staff. “The supervisors are the ones who are overpaid, and they are constantly micromanaging the nurses, looking to blame them for anything. It’s a nightmare. I’ve seen situations where the supervisors are so busy bothering the nurses that the facilities don’t even get cleaned properly.”

She also echoed Perleoni’s comments: “Even the health care benefits of nurses are under attack. At this hospital [NYPH], I’ve seen some workers forced to go to Mt. Sinai for their own care. It doesn’t make any sense. I also remember that nurses in Buffalo earlier this year held a strike. We should support them as well, they’re all in the same boat.”

The ongoing pandemic, which has been compounded by outbreaks of respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and influenza, has had a devastating impact on the physical and mental health of New York health care workers. Those not driven from the profession 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 United States during the spring of 2020.

It is noteworthy, but unsurprising, that seven of the 22 major strikes in 2022 (that is, those that involved 1,000 or more workers) were carried out by increasingly militant nurses and other health care workers. Health care workers

have battled the pandemic daily since its onset. They have witnessed firsthand the social crime of the “herd immunity” policy that was initiated by President Donald Trump and continued by President Joe Biden.

This unscientific policy gutted the ranks of health care workers and has left more than a million people dead in the US alone. Health care workers also have seen the giant hospital corporations make billions of dollars in profits while receiving billions of dollars in federal bailouts under the CARES Act. Yet every new contract is engineered to squeeze more labor out of these workers with less staff, lower pay and fewer health benefits.

The potential strike at New York hospitals is only the first of many contract struggles to come this year. The agreement for workers at New York City Health and Hospitals will expire in March, and contracts for 75,000 Kaiser Permanente workers in California, Oregon and Washington will expire on September 30.

A sharp divide exists between the militant rank-and-file workers who voted overwhelmingly to strike and NYSNA’s bureaucratic apparatus, whose role is to stifle workers’ opposition and isolate strike actions on behalf of their true constituency: the health care corporations. The bureaucrats’ treacherous role in recent struggles makes this fact 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 personal protective equipment and improved wages, benefits and working conditions. The union, however, ended both strikes without satisfying any of the nurses’ demands.

Contract negotiations between NYSNA and New York City Health and Hospitals, the largest municipal health care system in the country, will begin in a few short weeks. But the NYSNA leadership refused to organize a united struggle, especially by New York City nurses.

NYSNA seeks instead to preempt any struggle that they know will find powerful support among health care and other workers throughout the city, nationally and internationally. They will pull out all the stops to stifle the growing militancy of workers across all industries.

NYSNA’s newly deepened alliance with the Democratic Party provides further evidence of its intentions. In October 2022, NYSNA entered the National Nurses United (NNU) union, which is a member union of the AFL-CIO. The main function of the AFL-CIO is to keep workers tied to the Democratic Party, the world’s oldest capitalist party. Under the Biden administration, the AFL-CIO has put its resources into the suppression of mounting worker opposition to the

herd immunity and austerity policies of the corporations. The federation seeks to convert workers’ desire to fight into fruitless appeals to the Democrats for reforms.

The phony “left wing” of the Democratic Party plays an equally treacherous role. In December, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, a supporter of the AFL-CIO, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York and Representative Ilhan Omar of Minnesota (both of whom are members of the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America), conspired with Congress and Biden to block a strike by 110,000 railroaders, forcing railroad workers to accept a pro-company contract brokered by the Biden administration that workers had already rejected.

It remains to be seen whether the NYSNA apparatus will succeed in coercing nurses at NYPH to approve what is all but certain to be a sellout contract. It is not too late; nurses can and must continue their fight. But the fight must be waged in opposition to and independently of the union bureaucracy. This means building rank-and-file committees in all New York hospitals to coordinate and unite their struggles.

Moreover, the fight against individual hospital corporations must be rooted in a fight to take profit out of medicine. The giant hospital chains, pharmaceutical companies, insurance providers and medical equipment makers must be transformed into public utilities under the democratic control of health care workers themselves. Only through such a struggle can high-quality health care be provided to all as a social right. More broadly, the fight against the pandemic, austerity and war can only be won in a fight to end the capitalist system and to replace it with socialism.



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