

Seven thousand nurses at two New York hospitals launch open ended strike

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9 January 2023

Over seven thousand nurses at two of New York City's largest private hospitals, Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx and Mount Sinai Hospital on Manhattan's East Side, began a strike Monday morning after the expiration of their contracts on December 31.

The walkout, the latest in a wave of strikes to hit the healthcare industry, comes nearly three years after the onset of the pandemic exposed and exacerbated the crisis at hospitals in New York and beyond. The strike is a reflection of the determination by nurses to take a stand for hospital conditions that prioritize worker and patient well-being over industry profits.

Late Sunday night, Democratic New York Governor Kathy Hochul made a last-ditch effort to force through binding arbitration in order to prevent a strike. The intervention was immediately supported by the hospitals, which know full well that the move is aimed at maintaining the status quo.

Hochul, who touted her involvement in negotiations over the course of weeks, is seeking to force through similar agreements to those reached by New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) with eight other hospitals. Over the past week, the union has pushed deals with below-inflation wage increases of 7, 6, and 5 percent over three-year contracts that do nothing meaningful to address the staffing issues.

In her statement Sunday night, Hochul pledged that the state would "continue to enforce staffing requirements" that are, in practice, widely ignored.

As one worker told the WSW, "The system is f***ed up, and we realize the [hospital] bureaucracy and their

supporters are benefiting from unsafe patient ratios and our having to work long shifts in dangerous conditions."

Matt Allen, a registered nurse who has worked at Mount Sinai Hospital for over seven years, told CBS New York, "Patients have been in unsafe situations for a very long time now. Us nurses have been calling out for help from the hospital administration, saying 'hey, there's too many patients and too little nurses!'

"It's heartbreaking when our licenses are on the line," he added. "If we're taking care of too many patients, we're at greater risk of making a mistake."

New York City hospitals are again in the midst of an upsurge of patients with the spread of the XBB.1.5 strain of COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses that have already led to bed shortages at pediatric facilities and continue to threaten to overwhelm the system. The crisis situation is the direct consequence of policies pushed through by Hochul and the rest of the political establishment to abandon all public health measures and let the pandemic run unconstrained.

Even prior to 2020, overcrowding at hospitals like Montefiore routinely resulted in patients being treated in hallways, endangering their health. The situation has only worsened over the past three years.

The same basic conditions prevail throughout hospitals in the city. NYSNA, however, broke up bargaining for this round of contracts into individual hospitals. Over the past week, the tentative agreements announced at one after another hospital served to pressure those at the remaining facilities to accept a deal that failed to

meet their basic demands. Nurses at Brooklyn's Wyckoff Heights Medical Center meanwhile have set a strike date of January 17, while those at Interfaith and Kingsbrook Jewish have yet to serve notice.

The hospitals are counting on NYSNA's isolation of the strikers, together with the assistance of the Democratic Party in the city and state, to force an end to the struggle. They are also preparing strikebreaking efforts, actively recruiting scab nurses, spying on workers and threatening workers with retaliation.

There is massive support for striking nurses among workers in New York and beyond. Hundreds of thousands of municipal workers in the city are currently without a contract. After being lauded as heroes for working through the initial stage of the pandemic, they are now treated as disposable and struggle to make ends meet amid record inflation. And throughout the world, healthcare and other workers are beginning to take action, including the historic strike of National Health Service nurses in the United Kingdom.



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