

Mobilize the working class behind the New York nurses strike!

WSWS Health Care Workers Newsletter
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The first major strike of 2023 began yesterday when more than 7,000 nurses walked out at Montefiore Medical Center and Mount Sinai Hospital, two of the largest private hospitals in New York City. Contracts for these nurses expired on December 31.

The strike is a powerful demonstration of the growing militancy of the working class. Nurses are determined to fight for safe staffing levels, which have only worsened during the pandemic, and for wages that beat inflation, which is at the highest level in decades. They are expressing immense anger over the criminal response by the ruling class to the COVID-19 pandemic.

New York City health care workers have borne the brunt of the pandemic from the very beginning. Millions around the world were shocked and angered by the images of Mount Sinai Hospital nurses forced to use garbage bags as makeshift personal protective equipment (PPE) when New York was the epicenter of the global pandemic in spring 2020.

Dozens, if not hundreds, of health care workers have died in New York, including several nurses at Mount Sinai and Montefiore hospitals. One nurse at Mount Sinai told the WWS, “We can’t have fair staffing because we are underpaid at hospitals across the metropolitan area... We had our nurses die from COVID and also bring illness to their grandparents, who died from COVID. What does Mount Sinai say about that? We’re not going down again.”

Now, in the fourth year of the pandemic, health care workers are confronting a tripledemic of the more vaccine resistant XBB.1.5 variant of SARS-CoV-2, along with the flu and RSV. Once again, hospital beds are filling up and patients are being boarded in hallways.

While health care workers have lost their colleagues

and patients to COVID-19 and have seen a staggering deterioration in their working and living conditions, the profits of the “non-profit” hospitals and the income of their top executives have soared. At the same time, they have received tens of millions of dollars in tax breaks and COVID relief money.

There is immense popular support for the strike. But the biggest danger comes from the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) bureaucracy, which has systematically divided nurses and imposed sellout agreements at several hospitals. The pattern-setting deal at New York-Presbyterian Hospital provides raises below the rate of inflation and includes vague language about staffing that will do nothing to address nurses’ most pressing demand. NYSNA’s overriding goals have been to prevent a joint struggle by all 17,000 nurses and minimize the impact of their struggle on the profits of the hospitals.

If this struggle is to be won, nurses must elect a rank-and-file strike committee to transfer decision-making power from the NYSNA bureaucracy to rank-and-file nurses on the hospital floor. This committee must outline a series of non-negotiable demands, including enforceable nurse-to-patient ratios, the hiring of hundreds of new nurses and inflation-busting wage increases to meet the cost of living in New York City.

The strike committee must reach out to nurses and health care workers at private and public hospitals across the city and prepare joint demonstrations and strike action to win these demands. At the same time, the strike committee should reach out to the hundreds of thousands of teachers and other city workers working without contracts, and the transit and UPS workers whose contracts expire later this year.

The conduct of this struggle cannot be left in the hands of the NYSNA-NUU bureaucracy, which is

working with Governor Kathy Hochul and Mayor Eric Adams to shut down the strike as soon as possible.

In 2022, nearly a third of the 22 major work stoppages in the United States involved nurses and other health care workers. Despite the determination of striking nurses in Minnesota, California and other states—and the popular support they won—these strikes were betrayed by the nurses unions.

The Minnesota Nurses Association—which is affiliated with the NNU—blocked an indefinite strike by 15,000 nurses at 16 hospitals in Minneapolis, St. Paul and Twin Ports. It stampeded workers into ratifying a contract that cut real wages and provided no guarantees of safe staffing. An egregious aspect of the contract is its requirement that a hospital unit cross a threshold of dangerous conditions (such as patient falls and other accidents) before “management and the union” even begin to “re-evaluate staffing levels.”

The fight by New York nurses is part of a growing offensive by the working class across the world, including in the United Kingdom where National Health Service nurses and ambulance drivers have walked out. In country after country, capitalist governments find trillions to prop up the fortunes of the rich and fund the reckless drive to World War III, while slashing public health care and reducing life expectancy, especially for millions of older workers deemed too expensive to keep alive.

The strike by New York City nurses can and must be won. This will only be possible if rank-and-file nurses take the conduct of the fight into their own hands and transform it into a powerful movement to take profit out of medicine and guarantee everyone the right to high-quality health care.

The *World Socialist Web Site Health Care Worker Newsletter* will provide every assistance in the fight to establish these committees. Contact us today.

New York nurses: For assistance in forming a rank-and-file committee, please fill out the form below.



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