

# New York City nurses determined to win safe staffing levels

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More than 7,000 nurses continued their powerful strike for a second day at Montefiore Medical Center and Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. After three years of acute stress and overwork during the pandemic, the nurses are fighting to reverse long-standing understaffing, which prevents them from caring for their patients safely and effectively. They also are demanding adequate raises to keep pace with persistently high inflation.

The strike is part of an ongoing and international wave of health care workers' struggles. In the United States, nurses and other health workers waged seven of the 22 major work stoppages last year. Nurses who work for the United Kingdom's National Health Service and ambulance drivers have also walked off the job. These struggles reflect workers' opposition to governments' criminally negligent response to the pandemic, which flows from the subordination of human health to private profit.

"The reason why we are on strike is because we are short-staffed," Sadie, a nurse in Mount Sinai's psychiatry department, told the *World Socialist Web Site* Tuesday night. "Just prior to going on strike, I went in three days and worked 12-hour shifts without a break. We had many observations because a patient could fall or a patient was aggressive. We have to assign the assistant staff to do that, which leaves nurses to give medications, check out orders, and take care of everything the assistants usually take care of. At the end of the shift, we even tell our managers or nurse administrators, 'Listen, we're so short we didn't get to take a break.' The answer we get is, 'You don't know how to manage your time.'

"This is a chronic issue," she explained. "We're taking this stand because we care about our patients, our patients' safety. It comes to the point that if you can't deliver proper care, patients' lives may be at stake."

The interviewer raised the widespread support that exists throughout the working class and that the strike can be a catalyst for uniting struggle to prioritize lives over profit. "That's the bottom line," Sadie responded. "It's the patients. It's the community. It's everything, whether in a

hospital setting, or a school setting or transportation. It's the community's health and safety."

Nurses also expressed frustration over the isolation of the strikes at Mt. Sinai and Montefiore due to the separate deals the New York State Nurses Association struck with other private hospitals in the city.

"I personally think we should have stuck together and gone on strike as one union, as nurses," another Mount Sinai nurse told the WSW. "If we had stood united, the point would have been proven across all hospitals, all borders. So, I'm a little disappointed that they reached some sort of tentative agreements at other locations. Either way, we're out here, we're standing up for what we believe in, and like we've all stated, it's not about the money. It's about staffing ratios, what's safe for our patients. That's the oath that we took and that's the oath that we're standing by."

There are growing signs that NYSNA officials are attempting to shut down the strike at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx. Late Monday night, union officials told a crowd of nurses that the strike could be over by Tuesday morning. Negotiations, however, continued Tuesday. Like they did at other hospitals, NYSNA bureaucrats are seeking to reach a pro-management agreement they believe they can coerce their members into ratifying.

But Montefiore management is pressing ahead with its strikebreaking operation. It is forcing licensed practical nurses from other locations to the strikebound Bronx hospital. The LPNs are members of 1199 SEIU, which took the pro forma step of sending a cease-and-desist letter to Montefiore Medical Center.

Reports on social media emerged, however, that travel nurses at Montefiore have threatened to leave. They are burdened with an outrageous total of 17 medical-surgical patients each. Doctors are removing intravenous tubes and discharging patients, according to one source.

Montefiore and Mount Sinai are two of eight hospitals that received 10-day strike notices as their contracts with NYSNA were expiring. Having delivered these strike notices, NYSNA worked furiously to reach concessionary

agreements and prevent simultaneous strikes from taking place. Instead of waging a united struggle, NYSNA has divided nurses by hospital, thus undermining their strength.

Nurses at Mount Sinai Morningside and West approved a tentative agreement yesterday. On Monday night, nurses ratified tentative agreements at Flushing Hospital Medical Center, Richmond University Medical Center and BronxCare after a two-day rushed vote. These votes follow ratifications at New York-Presbyterian Hospital and Maimonides Medical Center—the latter being voted on less than 24 hours after the announced deal.

The tentative agreement with New York-Presbyterian Hospital came first, and NYSNA has used it as a template for the subsequent agreements. It provides only vague promises of improved staffing and includes raises that do not keep pace with inflation. Although NYSNA pressured nurses at New York-Presbyterian into ratifying the concessionary agreement, 43 percent of nurses at the hospital voted no.

Workers have openly expressed anger at NYSNA's betrayals. "Scream 'unity' all you want. Nothing will change," one worker wrote on the union's Facebook page. "NYSNA did not support nurses during the Pandemic. They didn't fight for the fired nurses. So we have a shortage."

NYSNA is justifying the isolation of strikers at Mount Sinai and Montefiore by selling the lie that the terrible conditions nurses face at these locations are unique. But even if this were the case, it would only underscore the need for nurses throughout the city to strike in unison to raise the conditions at Mount Sinai and Montefiore so they cannot be used to drive down conditions for all nurses. But the principle of "an injury to one is an injury to all," is completely alien to the well-heeled NYSNA bureaucrats who are tied at the hip with hospital management and the Democratic political establishment in New York.

There is a strong sentiment among strikers and supporters, however, for broadening this struggle. Nurses have received an outpouring of support from workers in many industries. This support must be mobilized through the formation of a rank-and-file strike committee, which will fight to spread the strike through the city's private and public hospitals and broader sections of the working class, including teachers, transit workers and UPS workers.

As a nurse at a city hospital in New York told the WSWS, "Nurses and health care workers here and around the globe are exhausted from doing their best to compensate and care for an overwhelming number of patients of all ages coming into hospital. We must fight for what nurses and health care workers need to protect and care for patients and for them to be compensated for the rise in cost of living—not what these hospital corporations say they can afford."

"Where are the banging pots and pans now?" asked Sade, a middle school teacher in Brooklyn. "The people of New York City need to show support for our nurses now! Under the current medical system, hospitals are run by corporations for profit. They keep staff numbers low so they can reap millions. Who suffers? The nurses who are overworked and the patients who need their help."

"Our school currently does not have a working nurse due to the strike. This raises the question as to whether we should also be walking out," an a New York teacher told the WSWS. "If students cannot be kept safe, then everything must be shut down."

"On top of that, teachers have been fighting for the same thing that nurses are. Better wages, safe staffing, more support and adequate safety measures. In fact, we are currently working under an expired contract. We have nothing to lose and everything to gain by supporting health care workers' actions right now. We need to build an independent leadership that will not cower in the face of great tasks like organizing a strike in sympathy and solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the hospitals and clinics."

"It's so disrespectful what the hospitals are doing," a retired New York teacher added. "But that's what big business does. When nurses were wearing diapers on their faces because there was no personal protective equipment, everyone was applauding them. Now they are going to get scabs. We have the numbers. I would want to walk with them, of course. I must give support. It scary when you're walking away from a paycheck, but you have to fight for what you believe."

*Are you a striking nurse? Fill the form out below to get more information about building rank-and-file committees.*



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