

Union announces sellout deal, shuts down strike by 7,000 New York City nurses before ratification vote

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The New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) announced Thursday morning that it had reached an agreement at two New York City private hospitals and ordered 7,000 striking nurses to return to work before any ratification vote.

Full details of the deal--which workers will begin voting on next Tuesday--have not been released. What has been reported makes it clear that the NYSNA bureaucracy has ignored nurses' major demands, especially in regards to safe staffing levels.

According to the *New York Times*, management at the Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx has agreed to "the creation of more than 170 new nursing positions." This is a third of the 500-nurse gap that striking nurses say exists at the hospital.

A summary of the Montefiore deal by NYSNA claims it won "precedent setting" staffing enforcement with "financial penalties paid out to affected nurses." In reality, management and the union have agreed to pay bonuses to exhausted nurses who agree to work on shifts, which are understaffed and dangerous. Rather than addressing the issue of staffing, this will serve as a financial incentive for nurses to risk their lives and the lives of their patients.

As for wages, the three-year deal provides eight, seven and six percent raises, which barely keeps up with the rate of inflation, particularly in one of the most expensive cities on the planet. This will serve as a further disincentive for new nurses, many of whom are burdened with large student loan debts.

Mount Sinai and Montefiore both issued statements welcoming the "fair and responsible" agreements and

praising the NYSNA leadership.

Nurses should reject the undemocratic methods used by the union bureaucracy to betray their powerful three-day strike and insist that there be no return to work before ratification vote. At the same time, nurses should elect rank-and-file committees to organize the defeat of the sellout and the expansion of the strike to all private and public hospitals.

On the picket lines at Montefiore Wednesday night, nurses spoke about their struggle against dangerous levels of understaffing and the catastrophic state of the health care system in the fourth year of the pandemic.

Tarashon, a nurse practitioner at Mount Sinai with 14 years of experience, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "They put us in the position of having staff shortages [prior to the pandemic]. There is no way that nurses should have ratios of one to 15, one to 20. At this point we are not doing nursing. We are just trying to keep our heads above the water. So we need to have safe staffing."

With the strike, she said, "We are trying to change the future of nursing, to hold the hospital responsible. And they should be fined if they can't uphold the grid. They need to fill these vacancies."

A nurse with 10 years of experience who works in medical surgery told the WSW, "Our fight is always about safety. We cannot work with as many as eight patients. We do not want to give bad care. We are here to win a good work environment. We had to work through the COVID pandemic, and all of us have been infected."

Both Mount Sinai and Montefiore have offered compensation packages that include an 18 percent raise over three years, which is similar to what was offered by other hospitals that have reached deals in recent days. At the current rate of inflation, this means a cut in real wages.

Nurses at Mount Sinai, currently the lowest paid in NYSNA, insisted in discussion with the WSWs that this was not enough.

“Staffing, nurse-to-patient ratios and salary go hand in hand,” Jessica, a registered nurse (RN) said.

Rio, a case manager at Mount Sinai for over 11 years, said, “The hospitals are big industries... We are spending 12 hours a day in service to make a living, but then we find we are living where we can’t afford to live or the cost of transit and so on.”

Keith, a nurse with 25 years of experience, pointed out, “The executives are making millions of dollars, so they can afford living here, and work less. It is hard when you are a health care worker.”

The strike is already having a major impact on the hospital system, as both hospitals have dramatically reduced the number of patients, are postponing non-emergency surgeries and diverting ambulances to other hospitals. Temporary staffers and administrators with nursing backgrounds are reportedly being assigned to make up for the thousands of nurses who are striking.

Jessica, a striking RN at Mount Sinai, told the WSWs Wednesday morning, “They’re bringing in traveling nurses, but that’s not going to be enough—no way!” Democratic Mayor Eric Adams has urged residents to only call 911 when necessary.

Gothamist reported: “...those currently working in the affected facilities [reported] that the hospitals are struggling to staff some units and patient care is suffering. Montefiore received a cease-and-desist letter Tuesday from 1199 SEIU after the medical center began assigning licensed practical nurses with that union to fill in for members of the New York State Nurses Association who are on strike...”

Over the past several weeks, NYSNA has done everything to isolate and wear down the struggle by the New York City nurses. After an overwhelming strike authorization vote by 17,000 nurses at 12 hospitals whose contracts expired on December 31, the union has, in piecemeal fashion, been accepting tentative agreements that fail to address the principal demands by nurses.

All of the contracts contain the same vague language regarding staffing ratios that will do nothing to actually improve staffing levels. They also all contain an 18 percent wage increase over three years that will fail to meet the rising costs of living.

At Presbyterian hospital, the largest of the 12 hospitals, 43 percent of nurses voted against the tentative agreement.

A New York City health care worker from another hospital, expressed her anger to the WSWs about how NYSNA pushed through the tentative agreement at their hospital before the strike began on Monday.

“They didn’t send everyone the contract to review and only briefly covered the highlights, which were supposedly the best sections of the agreement. They’re incessantly drilling their message into us that this is the best historic deal, presumably for us, they could get at this time, if not all time.

“The fine print is what we find out about after the agreement is ratified, which the union sold us out, seemingly because the leadership received a whole bunch of money from the hospitals. The union leadership has repeatedly said we need to build power to get safe staffing, which they will enforce through oversight of hospital management and the filing of grievances, which is a lot of BS.

“With nearly 100 percent of NYC health care workers voting to take strike action, when will we ever have enough power to do the right thing and fight management for us to get safe staffing levels for patients? Why should we trust the leadership that sold us out?”

Other nurses also expressed a desire for a united struggle to the WSWs. When asked about broadening the fight to other hospitals, a striking nurse at Mount Sinai said, “Of course, that’s common sense!” Overhearing this, Jessica said, “They settled too quickly on the other contracts, but we are here, we’re the first, and maybe this will be the start of something broader.”

The fight by the New York City nurses can only be successful if it is broadened to other sections of the working class in the US and internationally, and taken out of the hands of the NYSNA bureaucracy. Nurses need to form a rank-and-file committee to link up their struggles with those of other nurses and workers across industries throughout the United States and internationally.

Ultimately, the fight of nurses for safe working conditions is inseparably linked to the struggle to end the subordination of life and the health care system to private profit.

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