

800 nurses poised to strike South Shore University Hospital in Long Island, New York

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Eight hundred nurses at South Shore University Hospital Northwell Health (SSUH) in Bay Shore, New York, plan to strike on Monday, February 27, unless a new agreement can be reached. The strike vote reflects the growing militancy of the working class, which continues to suffer from the ruling class' criminal handling of the pandemic.

The SSUH nurses' last contract expired in February 2022, and the workers voted by nearly 99 percent on February 3 to authorize a strike. Northwell Health has failed to agree to the workers' demands for better salaries and, more importantly, safe staffing. In 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic battered New York, Northwell Health ranked second among the state's health systems in the salaries, bonuses and perks it provided to its top executives.

"If the hospital enforced safe staffing ratios, I would be confident that I could go to work every day and practice safely, but we've tried to negotiate so many times, and the hospital still won't honor our requests," said Jennifer Scimone, a registered nurse at SSUH, in a press release from the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA). "It's nerve-wracking to go on strike, but at this point it's necessary because it's the only way left for us to be heard. We've worked hard our whole career to care and advocate for our patients, so we're not willing to lower our voices and settle for what is unacceptable and unsafe."

"A lot of nurses saw the pandemic as 'It has to get better than this,' but the opposite has happened," said Antranik Garabedian, another registered nurse, in the press release. "It's not that we can't provide patients with care, we can't provide them with the attention and level of care they deserve. I'd be willing to go on strike on staffing alone because there are some days that you have no one to lean on. I know my skill sets and the

years of experience I bring. For me to leave my patients' side is not an easy decision, but this could be my friend, my uncle, my dad. We're doing this for our patients."

Nurse Arielle Shea explained how understaffing affects even those outside the hospital environment, like her infant child. "I'm a pumping mom," she said in the press release. "I just came back from maternity leave a few months ago and to have to wait hours past the time I should pump, or not knowing whether I'll be able to at all. That takes a toll on me as a mom. I know there are laws about pumping and breaks, but physically when there's not another person around, you feel like you can't abandon your patients. It feels like we're put between a rock and a hard place. But that's also why nurses are more united. If we stand together, we can do so many things."

The strike authorization of the 800 SSUH nurses follows that of 17,000 nurses (also NYSNA members) at 12 New York City hospitals. The latter's vote occurred at the end of December and also passed by nearly 99 percent.

Among New York City nurses there was support for a united struggle across the 12 hospitals. But NYSNA kept these workers divided and announced sellout tentative agreements, one after another, at the individual hospitals. The union was unable to prevent a strike at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx and Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan but abruptly ended it in a matter of days, saying that it had reached new tentative agreements. NYSNA ordered nurses back to work before any ratification vote took place.

The union called these agreements "historic," but the new contracts do nothing to enforce safe staffing ratios. On the contrary, they institutionalize understaffing by allowing management to violate set staffing ratios in

exchange for paying financial penalties that are less than the cost of hiring more nurses. The agreement at Montefiore creates 170 new positions, but this is less than a quarter of the hospital's vacancies. Moreover, none of the contracts provide wage increases that keep pace with inflation.

NYSNA is a workers' organization in name only. Its true constituency is the hospital owners. A distinct line separates the militant NYSNA rank and file from the bureaucratic apparatus. The role of this apparatus is to stifle and isolate strike actions so that the hospitals can continue to make profits.

The bureaucrats' treacherous role in the recent struggles makes this clear, but these betrayals are far from the first. 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.

NYSNA has long supported the Democratic Party, which has adopted the herd immunity policy toward the pandemic throughout New York. President Biden, who has boasted of his support for the labor unions, is a friend only to the union apparatus, which he depends on as a labor police force. NYSNA's recent entry into National Nurses United only deepened its relationship with the Democrats.

In addition, several NYSNA officials are members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a party that serves to provide a false "leftist" cover for the Democrats. The DSA has publicly endorsed the profit-driven herd immunity policy that has brought the health care system to the brink of collapse. Along with the Democrats, the DSA bears responsibility for maintaining the very conditions of understaffing and overwork that SSUH nurses are fighting against.

The true attitude of these parties toward the working class was on display when the DSA, Democrats and Republicans joined hands last year to illegalize a strike by 120,000 railroad workers.

With their strike deadline less than a week away, SSUH nurses must learn from the experiences of other

NYSNA nurses and prevent the union from betraying their struggle. Trusting the NYSNA bureaucracy and the Democratic Party is the surest route to betrayal, as the strikes at Montefiore Medical Center and Mount Sinai Hospital prove. The SSUH nurses can take the initiative away from the NYSNA bureaucrats by forming an independent rank-and-file strike committee to carry forward their fight.



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