

San Francisco Bay Area nurses set to strike against understaffing, falling real wages

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Work at John Muir or St. Rose? Tell us what you're striking for by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Nurses at two San Francisco Bay-area hospitals are set to strike this week over unsafe staffing, worsening working conditions and inadequate compensation. A two-day strike of 200 nurses at St. Rose Hospital in Hayward, California, will begin on Tuesday, May 2, and a one-day strike of 78 nurses at John Muir Behavioral Health in Concord is set for Wednesday, May 3.

St. Rose nurses have been working under an expired contract since May 2021. Nurses say that negotiations have failed to address recruitment and retention issues that have led to dangerous levels of understaffing. St. Rose Hospital is one of two remaining hospitals in Hayward and provides care for many poor, uninsured and working class patients across the city. It is a mid-sized, 153-bed community hospital that has struggled to hold onto staff in recent years. The John Muir facility in Concord is a 73-bed psychiatric hospital, which joined the CNA in 2021 and still does not have its first contract.

Workers at these relatively small health care systems face the same basic pressures as larger health care systems, such as Kaiser Permanente and Sutter Health, which have spearheaded brutal speedup, job cuts and cost-cutting across the medical profession.

At St. Rose, these cuts are imposed in part by predatory financial maneuvers. On the verge of bankruptcy and shouldered with \$75 million in debt, the hospital was purchased by Lex Reddy, the former CEO of Prime Healthcare Services. Prime Healthcare was charged in 2018 with Medicare fraud when the company was found to have encouraged upcharging for services and intentionally admitted patients for

expensive and unnecessary tests and hospital stays.

Workers were quoted in a union press release describing unsafe conditions for nurses and patients. "On night shift, it is common for one nurse to be caring for an assignment of 11 or more patients, when what is safe would be closer to five patients," Juani, a chemical dependency nurse, said.

St. Rose and John Muir face not only opposition from management but from the CNA bureaucracy, which has kept nurses on the job without a contract for two years and is limiting week's strikes to a few days. The nurses have been isolated and kept on the job in spite of a huge upsurge of health care workers struggles, particularly on the West Coast since mid-2021. These include:

- The strike in the fall of 2021 by tens of thousands of Kaiser workers across the West Coast, including a 90-day lockout of Northern California stationary and biomedical engineers;
- The strike by 5,000 Stanford nurses in April and May 2022;
- The one-day strike by 8,000 Sutter nurses, called by the CNA, in April 2022;
- The September 2021 strike at John Muir of mental health counselors, emergency room technicians, phlebotomists, psychiatric technicians, respiratory therapists and other health care workers under the Service Employees International Union-United Healthcare Workers West.

In each case, the workers were fighting for the same basic demands: ending brutal understaffing due to decades of budget cuts, curbing the rampant spread of COVID-19 and reversing ongoing cuts to real wages as inflation remains at or near record levels.

In each case, the unions worked to push through a pro-company contract that met none of these basic

demands, ordering workers to return to work without even a vote on the tentative agreement, let alone the full contract language. In each case, the CNA also refused to mobilize St. Rose and John Muir nurses despite the fact that both were out of contract.

So far, the CNA bureaucracy has limited actions to toothless informational pickets in January and March of this year and plans to order workers back on the job after the strikes conclude on Thursday.

The union apparatus is determined not take any action that might alienate the Democratic Party, particularly the administration of California Governor Gavin Newsom, to whom it donated \$3.4 million in 2022 (while paying out \$0 in strike benefits). The health care priorities of the Democrats in California and across the country are made clear by their decision to eliminate all remaining COVID-19 safety measures, which continues to kill hundreds of people per day and disable countless others with Long COVID in spite of false claims that the pandemic is “over.” Even basic protections, such as mask mandates, have now been removed in California hospitals.

St. Rose and John Muir nurses are looking for ways to fight the current inhumane conditions, but they cannot allow themselves to be limited to the stage-managed stunt actions of the CNA bureaucracy. Instead, nurses must take the initiative into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves and completely independent of and hostile to the corrupt trade union bureaucracies and the Democratic Party they serve.

This will provide them with the means to link up with nurses fighting against the same conditions in Northern California and around the country, as well as other sections of workers, including teachers and dockworkers in Southern California and autoworkers in the Midwest, many of whom are also building rank-and-file committees to oppose the bureaucratic limitation of their struggles.

Workers must fight together for the working conditions and compensation required for a dignified life, irrespective of what management says they can afford. For more information and assistance in building rank-and-file committees, contact the *World Socialist Web Site Health Care Workers Newsletter*.



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