

Trade union bureaucrats, Democrats prepare betrayal of New Jersey nurses' strike after they reject latest offer

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The strike by 1,700 nurses at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH) in New Brunswick, New Jersey that began on August 4 continues to gain strength.

RWJUH nurses, members of United Steelworkers (USW) Local 4-200, are fighting for increased staffing, higher wages, a cap on health insurance costs and health benefits in retirement. This is the first strike that nurses have waged at RWJUH, one of the largest hospitals in New Jersey. It is part of a growing rebellion of healthcare workers around the world against intolerable conditions.

“We teach the younger nurses, and then they stay here for a couple of years, and then they go move somewhere where they get better benefits,” an anonymous nurse told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “And we are tired of it!”

“If we are spread thin, too many patients to take care of, how can they get the attention and the care that they deserve, that any patient deserves?” Jennifer Kwock, a neonatal intensive care unit (ICU) nurse, asked CBS New York.

“We don’t have anyone to back up for help. We are scrambling,” neonatal ICU nurse Kate Trinidad told the CBS affiliate.

Nurses rejected the hospital’s latest offer last Wednesday. The full details of the rejected offer have not been publicized, but the act is sowing fears by the ruling class that additional forces are needed to shut down the strike which can spark a larger struggle.

In response, officials within the trade union apparatus and Democratic Party politicians have stepped up their

appearances on the picket lines as well as public comments feigning support for the strike. Nurses, however, must not be deceived. The increased lip service from Democrats is a sign that the ruling class intends to end the strike as quickly as possible.

Last Friday, Senator Bernie Sanders tweeted his professed support for the RWJUH nurses. “Safe staffing and fair compensation are critical to quality care,” Sanders tweeted. “It’s time for the hospital’s CEO to do the right thing and meet these workers’ demands.” In reality, Sanders played a key role in imposing the pro-company contract on railroad workers last year. While claiming to be nominally independent, Sanders has spent his political career working within the Democratic party and plays a leading role in encouraging illusions in this Wall Street party.

Christine Clarke, a Democratic candidate for the New Jersey Senate, has also visited the picket lines. Clarke is an environmental activist and local party official who has the support of the state Democratic chair and two county Democratic chairs.

Officials from other unions have also come to New Brunswick. These unions have a history of betraying strikes and imposing concessions on their members. A representative of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) spoke to the striking RWJUH nurses last week. Recently, SEIU officials welcomed the intervention of Democratic politicians to end a strike of 200 healthcare workers at Loretto Hospital in Chicago. They accepted a contract that provides annual raises that total 14.5 percent over three years, which barely

keeps pace with inflation.

Officials from the Rutgers American Association of University Professors-AFT (AAUP-AFT) also came to the picket lines last week. Four months ago, the AAUP-AFT and two other unions betrayed the first-ever strike at Rutgers. In that struggle, 9,000 full-time faculty, part-time adjuncts and graduate student workers demanded better pay, equal access to healthcare and better working conditions.

Conspiring with the other unions and New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy, the AAUP-AFT ended the Rutgers strike without even having achieved a tentative agreement. Union officials sent faculty back to work immediately on the basis of a vague “framework” for new contracts. Ultimately, the AAUP-AFT came up with raises for its members that barely keep pace with inflation.

For some time, the union and the hospital have been negotiating under a federal mediator. Last Wednesday, the parties met for the first time since the strike began. The USW submitted a counterproposal, and the date of the next negotiation session is uncertain.

The purpose of the federal mediation system is to come up with settlements favorable to the companies under the guise of “compromise.” Last fall, a federal mediation board worked out a proposal which served as the basis for the national railroad contract which was eventually imposed by Congress.

For its part, the USW is taking steps to limit the strike at RWJUH and wear down the nurses. Union officials did not hold a strike vote until after the contract had expired and a 14-day extension had belatedly been put in place. They have designated the action an unfair labor practice strike, which prevents workers from raising economic demands. In addition, the USW leadership has not called for the strike to be extended to the RWJUH campuses in the cities of Somerset and Rahway.

Elsewhere, the USW has played the central role in defeating a strike of 1,400 workers at National Steel Car in Hamilton, Ontario. Over a period of several weeks, the union leadership wore down strikers on the picket line before finally being able to ram through a sellout deal last week.

The betrayal of the National Steel Car strike is a warning to the RWJUH nurses. The only way to win safe staffing is to take control of the strike into their

own hands, out of the hands of the bureaucracy and the Democrats, by forming a rank-and-file strike committee.

The strike should be expanded to the other RWJUH campuses, appealing to workers in other sectors for support to put an end to the dangerous cost cutting that is putting patients at risk. Only by these means can the nurses prevent the betrayal of their struggle and win their demands.



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