

Providence union accepts agreement at two units, isolating workers at a third unit

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16 August 2023

After 11 months of negotiations and a five day strike earlier this summer, the Oregon Nurses Association (ONA) announced tentative agreements Friday with two of three facilities, Portland Providence Medical Center (PPMC) and Providence Seaside Hospital (PSH). Talks with the third facility, Providence Home Health and Hospice (PHHH), ended abruptly without an agreement when hospital negotiators refused to continue talks.

The announcement of separate deals isolates nurses at PHHH, weakening not just them but the entire workforce. There is no doubt that Providence management, with the help of ONA, deliberately tried to split off the PHHH from the other bargaining units, and will use this to try to enforce a worse contract there.

As a matter of principle, nurses at PPMC and PSH should reject the tentative agreements and insist that that all three units vote together. They should also form a rank-and-file committee, independent of the ONA officials, to unite workers across all three facilities.

This repeats the ONA's separation last year of two Portland-area hospitals, Providence St. Vincent and Providence Willamette Falls—which had both reached tentative agreements in June of 2022—from Providence Milwaukee, which then reached a tentative agreement the following month. In last year's struggle, nurses at the three hospitals had voted last year nearly unanimously to authorize a strike.

This year, ONA, under pressure from the rank and file, was forced to call a strike, which they limited from the start to five days. It was also a strike over Unfair Labor Practices, a legal category which prevents workers from raising economic demands.

As soon as the 10-day strike notice was issued, Providence tried to intimidate nurses, threatening that

any strike would only provoke an even worse offer. They also hired 475 scab nurses from the notorious strikebreaking firm U.S. Nursing Corp., which describes itself as “the premier strike nurse agency provider of job action services in the US.”

Management also sought to create a siege atmosphere by erecting cyclone fences with tarps attached to block the view from the striking nurses. Finally, they transferred patients to other Portland-area Providence hospitals, where other ONA nurses were made to provide care.

In spite of management's hardline stance, the ONA limited the strike in advance to only five days, seriously weakening its impact. In addition to parading the usual pro-corporate Democratic politicians at strike rallies, the ONA also invited Randy Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, of which the ONA is an affiliate. Weingarten, a highly-connected political operator, is infamous among teachers for forcing through the unsafe reopening of schools in 2020 and 2021 against opposition from teachers and parents, leading to significant outbreaks of COVID and deaths.

The agreements that were reached for the two bargaining units include wage increases of 17 percent to 26.7 percent for PPMC workers and “average wage increases of 14 percent and 20 percent” for PSH workers over two years.

However, these increases fall far short of either remedying the losses in real wages suffered in the previous contract due to inflation, or providing any genuine wage gains going forward. The PPMC 2019-2022 agreement included a pathetic 10.25 percent wage increase over four years.

The agreement also includes toothless language affirming Providence's “commitment to comply with

Oregon’s new nurse-to-patient ratio law,” which only raises the question why Providence and other Oregon hospitals have failed to even comply with legally required staffing ratios.

After three years of the COVID-19 pandemic, nurses were determined to not only regain lost ground but to make up for the long-standing crisis of pay, staffing, adequate time off and decent health insurance.

While the ONA describes the raises as “the highest percentage increases in the Portland metro area,” they fail to address the issue of wage parity with non-Providence nurses in the metro region. The initial announcement of the agreements also does not mention healthcare coverage.

Providence Health and Services, based in Renton, Washington is a massive “non-profit” operation with eight hospitals and 90 clinics in Oregon, and another 43 hospitals sprawled across the Western United States. It was the fifth largest non-profit in 2022—down from third largest in 2021—and reported 2022 revenue of \$27.3 billion. It claimed a net loss of \$6.1 billion, though \$3.4 billion of that loss was due to ending a partnership with a California-based hospital. However, it still retained \$9.5 billion in “total unrestricted cash and investments” according to Fierce Healthcare.

In 2019, the hospital compensated its president and chief executive Rod Hochman nearly \$11 million—down from \$11.5 million in 2017—meanwhile the next five below him were paid almost \$13.5 million collectively.



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