

# Strike of 1,700 nurses in New Brunswick, New Jersey, at critical juncture

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The courageous strike of 1,700 nurses at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH) in New Brunswick, New Jersey, is in imminent danger of being betrayed. The constant parade of Democratic politicians and officials from various trade unions on the picket lines indicates that the ruling class seeks to end the strike as quickly as possible by imposing concessions on the workforce. To prevent such a defeat and to strengthen their fight, the nurses must take the leadership of the strike into their own hands and turn to the working class for support.

The main demands of the nurses at RWJUH are increased staffing and better nurse-to-patient ratios. Their other crucial demands include higher wages, a cap on health insurance costs and health benefits in retirement. These entirely legitimate demands are based on the nurses' objective needs, as well as on the needs of patient safety.

These demands are universal among healthcare workers. Understaffing and inadequate wages and benefits are worldwide problems that have contributed to high levels of burnout and to a mass exodus of nurses from their profession. The root cause of this crisis is the for-profit healthcare system, which regards nurses as expenses that must be minimized, and patients as sources of revenue. The pandemic has graphically demonstrated that this arrangement is inimical to public health. Any workplace struggle on the part of nurses is inseparable from a struggle against the system of for-profit medicine.

RWJUH is the main hospital of Rutgers University's Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. The strike is occurring at the hospital's campus in New Brunswick, but the hospital also has campuses in Somerset and Rahway that remain unaffected.

These hospitals are part of RWJBarnabas Health,

which is the largest health care provider in New Jersey. This ostensibly not-for-profit charitable organization (a designation chiefly used as a tax write-off) has \$6.6 billion in annual revenue. Barry Ostrowsky, its former CEO, was paid more than \$16 million in 2022. He and his peers inhabit an entirely different social layer than the workers that they employ.

The RWJUH nurses are members of United Steelworkers (USW) Local 4-200. The union's policy for the strike can lead only to defeat. The USW has accepted the intervention of a federal mediator in the negotiations. Such officials are not neutral parties. As agents of the state, which represents the interests of Wall Street, federal mediators broker "compromises" that protect the holdings of the corporations and banks. Last year, President Joe Biden convened a board of mediators to develop a pro-company contract that Congress ultimately imposed on railroad workers.

Furthermore, the USW has not called for the strike to be expanded or appealed to other workers for support. The USW has kept nurses at the Somerset and Rahway hospitals on the job. This tactic only isolates the New Brunswick nurses and strengthens RWJUH.

The USW is encouraging the nurses to appeal to the Democrats for help. But Biden and the Democrats in Congress have repeatedly bailed out the banks and last year banned a railroad workers' strike. For more than a year, the Biden administration has kept West Coast dockworkers on the job without a contract, to protect big business. In addition, the Democrats are waging a proxy war in Ukraine that threatens to become a nuclear catastrophe. At the same time, they are preparing for an even bigger war against China.

Senator Bernie Sanders has tweeted his support for the RWJUH nurses. Though nominally an independent, Sanders has systematically sought to cultivate illusions

that the Democrats can be turned into a progressive party that responds to workers' needs. Representative Frank Pallone also has visited the picket line and has been acting as another mediator in the dispute. In Congress, Pallone has advocated the suppression of left-wing politics on the internet and promoted anti-Chinese sentiment to buttress Washington's war plans.

The USW also has welcomed officials from various trade unions to the picket lines. These officials maintain their lucrative positions by collaborating with the companies with which they allegedly negotiate. Representatives of the SEIU, which has just imposed an inadequate contract on 200 healthcare workers at Loretto Hospital in Chicago, came to the picket lines to support the USW.

Even more significant was the visit to New Brunswick by Charles Wowkanech, president of the New Jersey AFL-CIO. Wowkanech is a career bureaucrat who personifies the interconnection of the trade unions and the Democratic Party. He recruits workers to run for political office and serves on a labor task force assembled by Governor Phil Murphy, a multimillionaire and former financier. Ignoring the mounting evidence of a summer surge of COVID-19, Wowkanech has publicly stated that the pandemic is "behind us." He fully supports the ruling-class agenda of ignoring the pandemic and exposing workers to the risks of infection and reinfection.

The RWJUH nurses cannot win their demands, which reflect their most basic needs, by appealing to the pro-corporate Democrats or to the treacherous trade union bureaucrats. These forces are actively working to defeat the strike as soon as possible. The nurses' real allies are other workers, in healthcare and in every other industry. The rising cost of living and the corporations' attacks on jobs are increasingly forcing these workers to fight back. It is to them that the nurses must turn for support.

The first step for the RWJUH nurses will be to wrest control of their strike from the USW leadership. The nurses must form a rank-and-file committee that is independent of the trade unions and of both capitalist parties. To break out of the isolation that the USW has imposed on them, the nurses must broaden the strike to the Somerset and Rahway campuses of RWJUH. To wage a still more powerful fight, the nurses should appeal to other healthcare workers, teachers, New

Jersey Transit workers, UPS workers and all other sections of the working class who are being driven into struggle. The fight for safe staffing and better wages cannot be won without waging a battle to replace the for-profit health system with a socialist system that delivers the best medical care to all as a human right.



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