

United Steelworkers asks New Jersey governor to intervene in nurses' strike

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The United Steelworkers (USW) has called on Governor Phil Murphy of New Jersey to intervene in the strike of more than 1,700 nurses at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH) in New Brunswick. This appeal is the latest sign that the union seeks the Democrats' help in ending the strike quickly and imposing a pro-management contract on its members. The nurses must heed this warning by taking the initiative away from the union leadership and expanding the strike.

“United Steelworkers call on all our elected officials, including Gov. Murphy, to stand with working people and support the unfair labor practice strike at Robert Wood Johnson,” said David M. Wasiura, USW District 4 director, late last week. “It’s time for Gov. Murphy to show he also prioritizes our community by actively supporting members of USW Local 4-200.”

Wasiura is a career union official and a member of the executive council of the New York AFL-CIO. Having worked for the presidential campaign of John Kerry and served in the USW’s political department, Wasiura also has links to the Democratic Party. The overriding priority of the Democrats is the war in Ukraine, and the party has responded with silence to the current resurgence of COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations.

The main demands of the striking nurses at RWJUH are increased staffing and better nurse-to-patient ratios. No less important are the nurses’ calls for higher salaries, caps on medical insurance costs and healthcare benefits in retirement. The nurses have been on strike since August 4, and negotiations between the USW and hospital administration, which are taking place under the aegis of a federal mediator, are at a standstill. No new negotiations have been scheduled.

“Through COVID, management saw that we were

able to do more, faster, and work when we’re tired,” said a nurse who works in open heart surgery. Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) on condition of anonymity, he said that management seeks to double nurses’ workloads. “For me, even though the hospital gives us a raise, we’re going to be the clowns if we don’t get patient ratios.”

RWJUH is part of Rutgers University’s Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. In addition to the New Brunswick campus, RWJUH also has campuses in Somerset and Rahway. These hospitals are part of RWJBarnabas Health, an ostensibly not-for-profit organization that is the largest healthcare provider in New Jersey.

“When Barnabas took over in 2016, staffing started to change,” said a nurse from the cardiovascular intensive care unit (ICU) who preferred to remain anonymous. “They don’t go by the safe staffing of most hospitals.”

To date, Murphy has refused to intervene in the strike. No upcoming meetings between the governor, RWJUH management and the USW have been confirmed. “The administration encourages both parties to maintain an open dialogue and will continue to remain engaged with them as they work towards a fair and acceptable resolution to these negotiations,” said Murphy spokesperson Christi Peace on August 8.

Peace described Murphy as “a strong proponent of organized labor.” This remark requires clarification: Murphy, a multimillionaire and former Goldman-Sachs executive, relies on the trade union bureaucracies to defend the interests of the corporations and banks at the expense of the working class. In April, he played a pivotal role in ending the first-ever faculty strike at Rutgers and imposing a contract that did not meet workers’ demands. Graduate student workers, for example, were denied a living wage.

Other Democrats have inserted themselves into the RWJUH strike. Last week, Senator Bernie Sanders, a nominal independent who supports the Democrats, sent a letter admonishing Mark Manigan, CEO of RWJBarnabas Health, to negotiate with the USW. He criticized the health system for paying its executives millions of dollars in salaries while being “somehow unable to provide its nurses fair raises.”

Sanders cited reports that the company is paying travel nurses as much as \$300 per hour and reimbursing them for their travel expenses. If the company “can afford to hire these replacement nurses and pay their executives millions each year, they can afford a contract that keeps nurses safe and provides living wages and good benefits,” he wrote.

Despite his rhetoric, Sanders is no more a friend of workers than Murphy. Last year, Sanders helped both parties in Congress to prevent a strike of 120,000 railroad workers. By introducing an amendment that had no chance of passage, Sanders provided a phony left-wing cover for Congress as it mandated a pro-company agreement that workers had previously voted to reject.

Senator Bob Menendez of New Jersey has also intervened in the strike. Last week, he sent a statement to NJ Spotlight News expressing his support for the nurses and encouraging hospital administration to bargain with them. Menendez is a steadfast defender not of the working class, but of US imperialism. He opposed the nuclear deal with Iran, criticized President Donald Trump’s plan to withdraw troops from Syria and Afghanistan and worked to persuade Ecuador to revoke the asylum of journalist Julian Assange. Menendez may soon face federal charges related to allegations of having traded his political influence for gifts.

The USW is presenting these figures to the striking nurses as their allies. Meanwhile, the union has done nothing to expand the strike to the Somerset and Rahway campuses of RWJUH. This tactic has allowed RWJUH, with the aid of travel nurses, to remain fully operational. Moreover, the nurses are not receiving strike pay, even as the strike nears its fifth week.

“On the 31st, we’ll be uninsured and jobless,” the nurse in open heart surgery told the WSWS. He added that the USW has offered concessions on wages, ostensibly to persuade the hospital to improve nurse-to-

patient ratios. “Things could have been done better if it had been done earlier,” he said. “The union delayed the strike.”

Other nurses echoed these criticisms. “I don’t trust the union,” said the nurse from the cardiovascular ICU. “They’re being too soft. They’re not doing anything. They expect us to be out making noise, but they’re not making noise.”

The strategy of the USW has been to wear down the nurses and keep them isolated. In collaboration with figures such as Murphy, Sanders and Menendez, the USW hopes to use financial hardship and demoralization to pressure its members into accepting an agreement that does not meet their needs nor the needs of patient safety. To prevent this betrayal, the nurses must take charge of the strike by forming a rank-and-file committee that is independent of the union leadership. The strike can be won if the nurses expand it to the other RWJUH campuses and turn to the broader working class for support.



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