

Striking New Jersey nurses lose health insurance over Labor Day weekend

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More than 1,700 nurses who have been on strike for more than a month at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH) in New Brunswick, New Jersey, lost their health insurance as the Labor Day weekend began on Friday. They will now have to enroll in COBRA to maintain health insurance for themselves and their families at an exorbitant cost: \$700 per month for individual coverage and as much as \$2,500 per month for family coverage.

The tenacious struggle that the nurses began on August 4 has centered on the demands for increased staffing and safe nurse-to-patient ratios. The nurses are calling for ratios of one nurse to five patients in medical-surgery wards and one to two in intensive care areas, because of the complexity of care that the position demands. They also want the hospital to acknowledge that some patients in intensive care may need one-to-one care. No less important are the nurses' demands for raises, a cap on health insurance costs, and health benefits in retirement. In short, the struggle is over elementary demands and the requirements for maintaining safety in the healthcare setting.

The last negotiation session between RWJUH and United Steelworkers (USW) Local 4-200 occurred on August 16. No progress was made that day, and no new sessions have been scheduled since.

The nurses recognize that their fight is inseparable from that of healthcare workers worldwide. "This is not just for us here, it's for everyone," said a labor and delivery nurse with 39 years of experience, speaking on condition of anonymity. "Who wants to have no income? It's a lot of money that we're losing."

The current ratios at RWJUH are not fair to patients or nurses, said a nurse with 10 years' experience, who also chose to remain anonymous. "We don't want to be out here, but we have to fight for what's right."

Understaffing has sharply increased the level of stress, she added, particularly for less experienced nurses. "A lot of the young ones don't stay. They're too overwhelmed. It's a blow to their confidence."

Moreover, understaffing is likely contributing to worse patient outcomes at RWJUH. The hospital ranks fifth in the country for maternal and fetal morbidity and mortality, according to a nurse who also spoke on condition of anonymity. "We were 14th in the country a few years ago," she said. "We're worse than a third-world country." The responsibility for such a dangerous situation rests squarely with the RWJUH administration, and not with the nurses.

As the strike continues, RWJUH is wearing down the nurses, who are having difficulty caring for their families and paying mortgages and student loans. Many are looking for part-time positions as per diem nurses or paramedics. Others are applying for unemployment benefits to help them through the contract dispute.

As is common in other strikes, the USW, which reported total assets of \$1.6 billion in 2022, is not providing the nurses strike pay. Instead, it is handing out gift cards, which amounts to an insult to the dues-paying membership. Nurses can apply to the union for emergency assistance, but they must show their bank statements to be considered for this aid.

"You have to show you need it," Judy Danella, president of Local 4-200, told TAPinto New Brunswick. "It's not just given to somebody that has another job and doesn't need it." Danella received a salary of approximately \$160,000 from the USW last year and presumably does not need assistance.

Although RWJUH has two other campuses besides its facility in New Brunswick, the USW has not called on nurses at those hospitals to join their brothers and sisters on the picket line. Instead, it has encouraged the

striking nurses to channel their energy into useless appeals to Democratic politicians. The Democrats have offered empty gestures of support while working behind the scenes to contain the strike and end it as soon as possible.

A USW official recently called on New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy to support the strike. But the USW knows full well that Murphy, a multimillionaire and former executive at Goldman Sachs, helped Rutgers University and the trade unions to end the first-ever strike at the state university in April. Murphy enabled the university and unions to impose inadequate contracts on full- and part-time faculty, as well as graduate student workers.

Meanwhile, Senators Bob Menendez and Cory Booker, both of New Jersey, have written to Mark Manigan, president and CEO of RWJBarnabas Health, which owns RWJUH. The senators urged him “to move quickly to come to a good faith agreement that provides the nurses with safe standards, quality working conditions, affordable health care and living wages that support the employees, the hospital community and your patients.”

Last week, Senator Bernie Sanders appealed to management to negotiate with the nurses and referred to the stress and danger that nurses have endured during the pandemic. “They did their duty, and many of them paid the price. Thousands of nurses died during COVID, and many more became ill.” Indeed, the working class has paid for the murderous pandemic policies that both parties have supported.

Despite their rhetoric, Sanders and the Democrats represent not the working class, but Wall Street. They have not taken one step to protect workers or the public from the current wave of COVID-19, which has seen dramatic increases in the numbers of infections and hospitalizations. Instead, they are spending tens of billions of dollars on the war in Ukraine, and yet more money on preparations for war with China. Moreover, President Joe Biden collaborated with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union to keep West Coast dockworkers on the job without a contract for more than a year. The Democrats, including Bernie Sanders, also voted to ban the nationwide rail strike last year.

The USW has not taken the fight to RWJUH but kept the strike isolated and restricted to the routines of the picket line. It is counting on the nurses to cave in out of

frustration and hopelessness. Allowing the nurses to be stripped of their health insurance is but the latest step toward derailing the strike.

The nurses’ demands are not only reasonable, but also necessary. But the current economic crisis is spurring intensified attacks on workers’ basic rights. To win safe staffing that will enable them to provide the best care possible for their patients, nurses must take the initiative away from the USW leadership by forming a rank-and-file committee. The nurses must expand the strike by appealing to workers at the other RWJUH campuses, as well as workers in other industries, who face the same attacks. It is in the working class, not among the Democrats or trade union bureaucracies, that the nurses will find strong support. Ultimately, their struggle must become a conscious part of a larger fight to replace the system of for-profit medicine with workers’ control and socialist healthcare.



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