

New negotiations are a trap for striking nurses in New Brunswick, New Jersey

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14 September 2023

More than 1,700 striking nurses at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH) in New Brunswick, New Jersey, have begun their sixth week on the picket line demanding increased staffing and better nurse-to-patient ratios. Lacking healthcare benefits and strike pay, the nurses have nevertheless shown great persistence and courage.

For the first time since August 16, hospital management has agreed to resume negotiations with officials from United Steelworkers (USW) Local 4-200, the union to which the nurses belong. The meeting was scheduled for this week by a federal mediator, and two mediators have been involved in the dispute since the beginning of the strike.

Far from being impartial, federal mediators function as agents of the state who develop “compromises” that protect the interests of the corporate and financial elites. President Joe Biden convened a team of such mediators to draft a pro-company agreement that he and Congress imposed on railroad workers last year, after having prevented the workers from striking.

Fully aware of the crucial role that federal mediators play in labor negotiations, the USW leadership has gladly accepted their involvement in discussions with RWJUH, because it helps them cover up the betrayal that they are preparing. As other trade unions routinely do, the USW will use the mediators’ involvement as an excuse to pressure the nurses to accept another foul agreement that does not address any of their fundamental demands. Union officials will claim that the deal is “the best we could do” and use the increasing financial pressures on the nurses to end the strike.

Since the strike began on August 4, the USW has shown its unwillingness to wage a serious fight. Union leaders have not lifted a finger to expand the strike to

the other two RWJUH campuses. “Many of us are not happy with the way this is being handled,” a nurse told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “All the facilities should be out on strike. Why have the other hospitals not been called out?”

The nurse, who preferred to remain anonymous, explained that she had repeatedly asked union officials when a membership meeting could be held to discuss the strike. “They refused to answer me! Finally, they told me, ‘Well, there’s going to be a negotiation meeting next week. After that, we’ll call a membership meeting.’” This telling response by the USW indicates that the meeting will be held not to discuss the broadening of the strike, but to pressure nurses into accepting a concessionary contract.

Instead of mobilizing nurses at the other RWJUH campuses, the USW has called on various Democrats, including Governor Phil Murphy, to pressure the hospital. But despite his occasional pro-labor rhetoric, Murphy is a faithful steward of corporate interests. In April, Murphy ended the first-ever faculty strike at Rutgers University by hammering out a rotten agreement with the administration and the union officials.

Tellingly, the USW has repeatedly sought to redirect the nurses’ grievances into fruitless appeals for legislative reforms. For instance, the union recently welcomed state Senator Linda Greenstein to the picket line in New Brunswick. Greenstein is a primary sponsor of bill S304, which would mandate staffing ratios for various hospital units (e.g., one nurse for every five patients on a medical/surgical unit, one nurse for every four patients in a pediatric or intermediate-care nursery unit and one nurse for every six patients in a well-baby nursery). But similar bills have been introduced in New Jersey’s Senate for the past 20

years, and each has died in committee. Moreover, nurses in California know firsthand that the staffing ratios mandated by law are not enforced, and that hospitals routinely find ways to flout them.

Workers at RWJUH know full well how little value legislative reforms have as a means of improving working conditions and patient safety. “This is not just about RWJ,” said the anonymous nurse. “We are up against the hospital. We are up against the state, up against the government. All these powers are against us.”

Besides throwing its support behind the Democrats, the USW recently staged a pointless appeal to the health system that owns RWJUH. On Saturday, union officials led the striking nurses on a march to the home of Mark Manigan, president and CEO of RWJBarnabas Health, in Maplewood. Before joining RWJBarnabas Health, Manigan worked as a lawyer who advised health systems, insurance companies and private equity sponsors. His career has been dedicated to increasing corporate profits by cutting labor costs. USW leaders know that pleading with Manigan will lead nowhere. The silent vigil that they held outside his house was an empty symbolic gesture.

The RWJUH nurses should not expect a breakthrough to occur during this week’s negotiation session. On the contrary, they must be prepared to resist the conspiracy of the federal mediator, the administration of RWJUH and the USW leadership.

For almost six weeks, the USW has kept the New Brunswick nurses isolated from their brothers and sisters at the other RWJUH campuses. The union is hoping that the prolonged strike and the lack of income and insurance will wear down their resistance. In collaboration with the Democrats, the USW is seeking to push workers to accept a tentative agreement that does not provide the staffing, ratios, wages and benefits that they are demanding. Such an outcome would represent not only a defeat for the nurses, but also an attack on patient safety.

The fate of the strike depends on the course that the nurses decide to take. Ceding the initiative to the USW leadership will lead to a betrayal. The strike can be won only if the nurses take control of the struggle by forming a rank-and-file committee that is independent of the USW leadership and of both capitalist parties. The first step must be to broaden the strike to the

Somerset and Rahway campuses of RWJUH.

But the struggle is not limited to RWJUH. Healthcare workers everywhere, as well as workers in other industries, are facing the same attacks on their wages and working conditions, as the ruling class seeks to make workers pay for the war in Ukraine.

A reporter from the WSWS asked the nurse quoted above her opinion of the strike vote among healthcare workers at Kaiser Permanente. “I’ve heard talk that they are in a better situation than us, but I know better,” she said. “I took care of a person who worked for Kaiser, and their stories are no different than the nurses here. It really doesn’t sound good, and they should go out and fight for something better. We all should! Together!”

The public support that has buoyed the nurses on the picket line reflects stronger support within the broader working class. It is this class that must be mobilized, not Democratic politicians or well-paid union bureaucrats, to lead the strike to victory. Moreover, the strike must become part of a conscious struggle against the entire system of for-profit medicine, which is incompatible with providing the best standards of healthcare.



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