

Expand the strike at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital! Full strike pay for nurses!

Erik Schreiber
21 September 2023

After six weeks on strike, nurses at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH) in New Brunswick, New Jersey, recently voted overwhelmingly to continue their strike for increased staffing and better nurse-to-patient ratios. The vote shows remarkable determination, especially given that the union is starving workers out without strike pay, and the hospital cut off of their health insurance on Labor Day weekend.

The strike began on August 4, when more than 1,700 nurses walked out and began picketing in front of the New Brunswick hospital. In addition to improved staffing and ratios, the nurses are demanding raises, a cap on health insurance costs and health benefits in retirement. Nurses insist that the new contract must include improved patient ratios. They understand that the outcome of their strike will set a precedent for other hospitals.

The strike must be expanded to the other two RWJUH campuses and to the broader working class. Expanding the strike will require the nurses to take control away from the leadership of the United Steelworkers (USW), which is steering them toward defeat.

The union is allowing the nurses to be worn down and subjected to increasing financial pressure. It is refusing to mobilize any of its 1.2 million members to demand the restoration of healthcare, and has not provided one cent of strike pay out of its hundreds of millions in assets.

The USW has isolated the New Brunswick nurses from the nurses at the Rahway and Somerset campuses of RWJUH. Some of these nurses belong to other labor unions, and others are not in unions. This situation

reflects the balkanization of healthcare workers throughout the country, which serves to block them from waging united struggles. Nevertheless, these workers perform the same jobs, face the same intolerable conditions, share the same interests and must join forces.

Federally-mediated talks are at a standstill. During the last negotiation session on September 14, the hospital demanded that the USW either accept an offer that it made on August 2 or send the nurses back to work and submit the dispute to binding arbitration. The August 2 offer would provide nurses with a bonus of \$20 per hour if their units are not staffed according to guidelines. This bonus would not be paid, however, if a nurse called out sick. This offer would institutionalize understaffing at a cost that the hospital finds acceptable.

The USW's counterproposal was to remove the clause about calling out sick, but RWJUH refused. The union then rejected the offer without submitting it to the membership for consideration, understanding that it would have gone down in flames.

In the recent vote, the USW presented workers with three options: either accept the hospital's August 2 offer, go back to work and submit the dispute to binding arbitration or to continue to strike. Nurses voted by 90 percent to continue their strike.

The nurses were fully justified in choosing this option, but the USW has no strategy for victory. "We'll get back to the table one of these days and get them what they want," Judy Danella, president of USW Local 4-200, complacently told NJ.com. With this comment, the union official (who received a salary of approximately \$160,000 from the USW in 2022)

revealed her complete lack of urgency and her intention to continue down the same dead end, even as the nurses struggle to make ends meet.

Nurses who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* described their situation as stressful. Some are receiving unemployment benefits, and many cannot afford COBRA health plans for their families. As a result, they take the risk of remaining uninsured.

RWJUH has taken a hard line, knowing full well that any concessions it makes at this hospital will be demanded by nurses at its two other facilities. Moreover, there is industry-wide pressure against even modest improvements in working conditions, wages and other gains.

RWJUH has refused to meet more than occasionally for negotiations, and no new meeting has been scheduled. The hospital's recent ultimatum to the nurses reflected the administration's belief that it is in a strong position. In addition, RWJUH has gone on the offensive. It has gotten a superior court judge to issue a temporary restraining order against the striking nurses. The order treats nurses as criminals, forbidding them to block entrances to the hospital, disrupt traffic and "intimidate" workers and visitors.

Consistent with this treatment, workers also report that security has become extremely aggressive toward them. One nurse told the WSWS that a friend had been pushed by a security guard for marching on the sidewalk, which is public property. RWJUH claims that the nurses are threatening people's safety, and that security has to videotape the strikers because they are getting out of control.

The RWJUH nurses have shown great strength in choosing to strike. But the strike will not succeed if the USW bureaucracy remains in control. This is the lesson of one struggle after another over the last two years, from the Kaiser Permanente healthcare workers whose strike was canceled in favor of a sellout deal in late 2021, as well as the bureaucratic sabotage of struggles on the railroads, at UPS and the struggle now underway in the auto industry.

The only way to strike a powerful blow against RWJUH is for the New Brunswick nurses to take control of the strike by forming a rank-and-file committee that is independent of the union and of both big business parties. Expanding the strike is an urgent necessity. The New Brunswick nurses can do this by

reaching out to their brothers and sisters at the Rahway and Somerset campuses of RWJUH. They must also appeal to the 85,000 workers at Kaiser Permanente who recently voted to strike. The New Brunswick nurses will find powerful allies among healthcare workers and among other sections of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact