

Union focuses striking New Jersey nurses on fruitless appeals to multimillionaire governor

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Striking nurses from Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH) confronted New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy as he prepared to speak at the National Labor Relations Board's (NLRB) annual Labor Law Conference in New Brunswick on Friday. After Murphy delivered his remarks, he spoke briefly with two of the nurses, who asked him to pressure the hospital to provide the safe staffing and nurse-to-patient ratios that they have been demanding for more than three months.

Throughout the strike, the United Steelworkers (USW) has encouraged the nurses to appeal to Murphy and other Democratic officials. Such appeals have not produced and will not produce any gains for the nurses. The USW aims to block an independent struggle and keep the nurses tied to the pro-corporate Democratic Party.

The strike of about 1,700 nurses at the New Brunswick campus of RWJUH began on August 4. The nurses' most urgent demands are increased staffing and safe and enforceable nurse-to-patient ratios. Without achieving these demands, the nurses will not be able to provide adequate medical care or maintain a safe work environment. The nurses also are demanding increased wages, a cap on healthcare costs and health insurance in retirement.

"The administration looks at us like we're bodies that can do blood pressure," a striking nurse, who preferred to remain anonymous, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. Management wants nurses to get over their "pandemic hangover," she added. "Just do the day and check off a box. But it's more than that. You're taking care of people."

In 2016, the Robert Wood Johnson Health System merged with the Saint Barnabas Health Care System. The resulting network, RWJBarnabas Health, soon

became the biggest academic health system in New Jersey. "This strike isn't the same as the strike in 2006," said the nurse. "We're fighting a big corporation now, a big monster."

RWJUH has steadfastly refused the nurses' demand for enforceable patient ratios. The administration insists that it needs "flexibility" when patient acuity is high. It has spent nearly \$100 million on travel nurses to keep the facility running. On Labor Day weekend, the hospital cut off the striking nurses' health insurance. It later obtained a restraining order that limits the size of the groups in which the nurses can gather, prevents them from playing music and prohibits them from blocking entrances and disrupting traffic.

Murphy, a multimillionaire and former Goldman Sachs executive, postures as a defender of the working class. He has called the nurses "heroes" but has refused to intervene in the strike. "I have a lot of sympathy for them," Murphy told reporters after the NLRB meeting. "It's gone on way too long. I've said it to management on more than a few occasions: 'Get into a room with them, lock the door, throw the key away, figure it out.'"

Murphy's brief talk to two of the nurses after his NLRB speech marked the first time that he had met any of the nurses face to face. The nurses asked Murphy what his plan for the strike was. The governor dissembled, claiming he didn't know yet. This is nothing but an evasion that insults the nurses' intelligence. The reason that Murphy has not lifted a finger to help the nurses for more than three months is because he sides with management.

Murphy used similar deceptions in his speech before the NLRB meeting. He declared that New Jersey is "striking a proper balance between defending the rights of our workers on one hand, while creating a more

business-friendly environment on the other.” But under capitalism, workers’ interests and those of business owners are irreconcilable. There can be no “balance” between them, particularly during the current economic and political crisis. Murphy’s professional and political careers would have been impossible had he not understood this fact and constantly pursued “a more business-friendly environment.”

This pursuit prompted Murphy’s intervention in the first-ever faculty strike at Rutgers University, which occurred earlier this year. When 9,000 part-time and full-time faculty, graduate students, researchers and clinicians went on strike in April, they had been working without a contract for almost a year. Their last pay increase, which they had received two years earlier, was a miserable 2.5 percent. The workers struck for better pay, job security, affordable housing and benefits. Their walkout shut down classes at all the university’s campuses.

Murphy immediately called for an end to the strike and began discussions with university officials and union leaders. After five days, these conspirators ended the strike and sent faculty back to work, even though no agreement had been reached. Murphy and the unions later imposed contracts that did not address the workers’ demands or provide wages that keep ahead of inflation.

It is not the workers that Murphy supports, but the trade union bureaucrats, whom the governor trusts to suppress workers’ anger and enforce the interests of management.

The USW has dutifully played this role throughout the strike at RWJUH. The union, which reported \$1.6 billion in total assets in 2022, is not paying the nurses strike pay. As a result, the nurses have had to find second jobs to feed their families and pay their bills. Moreover, the USW has done nothing to expand the strike to the other RWJUH campuses. Instead, it has kept the New Brunswick nurses isolated and attempted to starve them into submission.

To vent nurses’ anger, the USW has organized various protest stunts and pointless appeals to Democrats such as Murphy, Senator Bob Menendez and Senator Cory Booker. But these officials fully support Israel’s genocidal campaign in Gaza, which has included the bombing of hospitals and the killing of healthcare workers and patients. They uphold the

interests of US imperialism and are incapable of responding to the needs of the working class.

The New Brunswick nurses will not be able to break the current impasse unless they take control of the strike. To win their demands, the nurses must form a rank-and-file committee that is independent of the USW leadership and of both capitalist parties. The urgent task is to expand the strike by appealing to the nurses and other healthcare workers at all RWJUH campuses and beyond. By turning to the broader working class, the nurses will find the forces they need for victory.



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