

Striking New Jersey nurses determined not to settle as union announces tentative agreement, prepares betrayal

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The United Steelworkers (USW) and Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH) announced a tentative agreement (TA) last Friday. The USW is preparing to end the nearly four-month-long strike by 1,700 nurses in New Brunswick, New Jersey, on the basis of an agreement that falls short of their needs. The nurses must prevent such a betrayal by continuing and expanding the strike, taking control out of the hands of the union bureaucracy.

The strike began on August 4 when the nurses walked out to fight for safe staffing and enforceable nurse-to-patient ratios. While the nurses have stressed that these are their main demands, they also have opposed penalties for nurses who call out sick. In addition, the nurses are fighting for a cap on health insurance premiums, health benefits in retirement and raises to help them face the rising cost of living.

A nurse at RWJUH who preferred to remain anonymous told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the strike had not ended. “We’re going to picket until we vote. We’re not going back until we see the contract.” Doubtless speaking for her coworkers, she said that the fight had been too arduous and too long for the nurses to settle for anything less than safe staffing. “We gave up a lot,” she said.

RWJUH in New Brunswick is the main hospital of RWJBarnabas Health, which is the largest healthcare system and the largest private employer in New Jersey. The network encompasses 17 hospitals, including campuses of RWJUH in other cities such as Somerville and Rahway. In 2022, RWJBarnabas Health reported \$7.6 billion in revenue.

For months, RWJUH has refused the nurses’ demand for clear staffing ratios, claiming that they would deny

it the flexibility it needs when patient volume is high. Trying to turn public opinion against the nurses, hospital officials accused them of engaging in “unlawful acts” and of continuing “to mislead the public” about staffing at RWJUH. On Labor Day weekend, administrators cut off the nurses’ health insurance. Weeks later, the hospital persuaded a judge to issue a restraining order that limited the size of the groups in which the nurses could gather and prohibited them from playing music.

As of this writing, neither the hospital nor the union has released any details of the tentative agreement to the nurses or the public. Informational meetings about the agreement are scheduled for this week, and a vote could be held next week.

In press releases, the USW has claimed that the agreement provides raises, caps insurance costs and includes enforceable safe staffing standards. Judy Danella, president of USW Local 4–200, called the agreement “historic” but provided no specifics. “The local bargaining committee unequivocally recommends ratification,” said Danella.

The absence of concrete information in these statements should give the nurses pause. Moreover, union officials have routinely attempted to prettify rotten agreements by calling them “historic.” If the TA is as strong as the USW claims, then there is no reason why the RWJUH workers should not have already received a copy with ample time to study it. Nurses in the neonatal intensive care unit of Mount Sinai Hospital in New York recently found that what the New York State Nurses Association called “a historic safe staffing victory” was actually an agreement that codified understaffing.

The New Brunswick nurses have little reason to trust the USW bureaucracy. The union, which reported \$1.6 billion in total assets in 2022, has refused to give the nurses strike pay. To stay afloat, the nurses have consequently had to scramble to find second jobs or apply for unemployment. The USW has provided paltry gift cards to the nurses, but, as one nurse told the WSWS, “gift cards don’t pay the bills.”

Moreover, the USW has kept the New Brunswick nurses isolated. It has refused to call for the nurses at any of the other RWJBarnabas Health facilities to join the strike. These nurses, like nurses around the world, face the same attacks from the profit-driven healthcare system. But the USW has opposed a united struggle, which would be far more powerful.

Instead, the USW has staged various protests to appear militant and to allow nurses to let off steam. In September, the USW held a vigil outside the home of Mark Manigan, president and CEO of RWJBarnabas Health. Predictably, Manigan remained deaf to the nurses’ demands.

In addition to such stunts, the USW has encouraged the nurses to appeal to various Democrats. They have repeatedly urged Governor Phil Murphy to pressure the hospital on their behalf. But Murphy, a multimillionaire and former Goldman Sachs executive, has done nothing to help the nurses. In fact, he has a relationship with the hospital’s administration. George Helmy, his former chief of staff, became executive vice president, chief external affairs and policy officer of the RWJBarnabas Health Medical Group in September.

The USW has also encouraged appeals to Senator Bernie Sanders, a nominal independent who has long provided “leftist” cover for the Democrats. In October, Sanders held a sham hearing of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions in New Brunswick. No other member of the committee attended the hearing, which ostensibly was called to discuss the severe staffing crisis in hospitals. Its true purpose, however, was to allow Sanders to posture as a fighter for nurses and to bolster the credibility of the USW.

The Democratic Party’s immediate priorities are to support Israel in its campaign of genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza and to escalate its proxy war with Russia in Ukraine. To wage these wars effectively, the Democrats seek to suppress the class struggle and all

opposition to war within the working class, relying on the trade unions to keep workers in line.

The USW has dutifully played its assigned role throughout the strike at RWJUH. It has refused to expand the struggle to other RWJBarnabas facilities and, by denying the nurses strike pay, has attempted to starve its members into submission. Like the other trade unions, the USW is deeply integrated into the Democratic Party. It has sought to sow illusions among the nurses that the Democrats would defend their interests. But the Democrats, and the USW itself, serve the interests of the corporate and financial elite.

The RWJUH nurses have fought a dogged and courageous battle for four months. They must not allow their struggle to be defeated now. The nurses must seize the leadership of their strike by forming a rank-and-file committee that is independent of the USW and of both capitalist political parties. The strike must be continued and expanded to other nurses and other sectors of the working class. The RWJUH nurses know that they are fighting not just for themselves, but also for healthcare workers everywhere. The logic of this fight leads to the replacement of the for-profit health system with a socialist system that provides healthcare to all as a human right.



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