

Reject the tentative agreement with Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital and expand the strike!

Erik Schreiber
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On December 1, the United Steelworkers (USW) announced a tentative agreement with Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH) in New Brunswick, New Jersey, where 1,700 nurses have been on strike for more than four months. The agreement, which the USW has endorsed, is a betrayal of the nurses who have fought so courageously and made so many sacrifices for so long. To ensure that their struggle does not end in defeat, the nurses must reject the agreement, seize control from the USW and expand the strike.

Since the strike began on August 4, the nurses' main demand has been the creation of mandatory nurse-to-patient ratios throughout the hospital. These ratios are necessary to prevent the overwork and burnout that are widespread throughout the healthcare industry. They are also necessary to reduce the risk of medical errors and ensure a high standard of care for patients.

The tentative agreement would establish nurse-to-patient ratios for the hospital and create a penalty that RWJUH must pay if it fails to meet them. In practice, however, such agreements have not guaranteed safe staffing, but rather have institutionalized understaffing. Hospital administrations prefer to pay a penalty than hire additional nurses. They consider the penalty a cost of doing business.

Mount Sinai Hospital in New York is a case in point. Having ended a three-day strike at the hospital, the New York State Nurses Association trumpeted a contract that it said would ensure safe staffing. After the contract was ratified, nurses in the hospital's neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) documented systematic understaffing in their department over a three-month period. Using the procedure outlined in the

contract, the nurses brought their grievance to an arbitrator earlier this year. The hospital's violation was undeniable, and the arbitrator calculated a penalty for it. But, claiming that Mount Sinai had made "extraordinary" efforts to address staffing, he reduced the penalty by 20 percent. As a result, the 150 nurses of the NICU were each awarded little more than a day's pay for three months of overwork.

The tentative agreement would also require RWJUH to hire 70 new full-time nurses by July 2024. "It's not the amount that we need," a striking nurse, who preferred to remain anonymous, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "What is 70 when we're short-staffed every day?"

In addition, the hospital would be required to replace the 130 nurses who resigned during the strike. These resignations, which represent about 8 percent of the workers who went on strike in August, are themselves telling. They indicate that a significant part of the membership had no confidence that the USW would lead the strike to victory.

The tentative agreement would also provide a raise in salary of 3.5 percent in each year of the three-year contract. These raises are approximately the same as the rate of inflation, which was 3.2 percent for the 12 months ending in October. In other words, in real terms they are not raises at all. Nor do they make up for the cuts in real wages the nurses endured during the past two years, when inflation reached 7 percent. But the most damning aspect of these proposed raises is that they are the same amount as the increases being given to other nurses within the RWJBarnabas Health network who did not go on strike.

Another of the nurses' demands has been a cap on

health insurance premiums. Under the tentative agreement, premiums would remain the same for the first year, but increase by 8 percent a year in the second and third years. These increases would further erode the nurses' take-home pay. In addition, the tentative agreement would deny nurses the healthcare benefits in retirement that they have been demanding.

"This is the same contract that we rejected two times, which is an insult!" one of the striking nurses told the WSWS on condition of anonymity.

Compounding the insult is the fact that Judy Danella, president of USW Local 4-200, called the deal "a historic agreement" in a press statement. "The local bargaining committee unequivocally recommends ratification," she said in another statement.

The USW has been consciously working against the nurses since the beginning of the strike. The union, which reported \$1.6 billion in total assets in 2022, has denied the nurses strike pay and callously directed them to file for unemployment instead. Although RWJUH has two other campuses besides the New Brunswick hospital, and RWJBarnabas Health encompasses 17 hospitals, the USW never sought to expand the strike to other facilities. It has kept the nurses isolated and attempted to demoralize them through mounting financial pressure.

To distract attention from its sabotage of the strike, the USW leadership has channeled the nurses' energies into a campaign for a state law that would mandate safe staffing ratios at healthcare facilities. But such legislation has been introduced in New Jersey's Senate each year for the past 20 years, only to die in committee. Furthermore, nurses in California, where such laws are in place, can attest to the fact that these laws are poorly enforced and frequently violated.

The USW's campaign for a safe staffing law is a deliberate attempt to keep the nurses chained to the Democratic Party, with which the union is intimately connected. But as the world's oldest capitalist party, the Democrats defend the interests of the banks and corporations against those of the working class. New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy, a Democrat, is a multimillionaire former financier whose previous chief of staff became an executive vice president at the RWJBarnabas Health Medical Group in September. He has steadfastly refused to intervene on the nurses' behalf.

At the national level, President Joe Biden and the Democrats in Congress are sending billions of dollars in arms to Israel so that it can continue its campaign of genocide and ethnic cleansing in Gaza. Israel's crimes, in which both parties in Congress are complicit, include the deliberate and systematic bombing of hospitals and the murder of healthcare workers and patients. The USW, which claims to represent the nurses at RWJUH, has not said a word in opposition to these atrocities. Nor has it responded to the call of the Palestinian trade unions for solidarity action to stop the genocide.

To continue supporting Israel's war, as well as the proxy war with Russia being waged in Ukraine, the Democrats seek to stifle all opposition within the working class. They are relying on the trade unions to ensure labor peace so that US imperialism can pursue its predatory goals without hindrance. By isolating and starving the nurses and distracting them with the pursuit of illusory reforms, the USW has faithfully played this role throughout the strike at RWJUH.

To prevent a betrayal, the RWJUH nurses must take control of their strike. Rejecting the rotten tentative agreement is only the first step. To continue the strike, the nurses must form a rank-and-file committee that is independent of the USW leadership and both capitalist parties. Through this committee, the nurses must reach out to other healthcare workers, and workers in other industries, to expand the strike. The fight at RWJUH is inseparable from the fight to replace for-profit healthcare with a socialist system that provides care to all as a human right. We urge all nurses who want to continue the strike to contact the WSWS.



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