

“Everything is going up except our wages”: Striking University of Illinois nurses in Chicago speak from the picket line

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Are you a health care worker at University of Illinois or another workplace with a story to tell? Make your voice heard by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Over 1,700 nurses at the University of Illinois hospital system, known as UI Health (UIH), in Chicago are on strike. Nurses had been working without a contract since August when the previous agreement expired. After a one-week strike that month, the Illinois Nurses Association (INA) sent nurses back on the job without an agreement.

In the last contract offer UIH offered a piddling wage increase of just 2 percent. Nurses have now authorized an indefinite strike to win increases in pay, improved patient-to-nurse staffing ratios, and for improvements to workplace safety and security.

Reporters with the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with nurses at the picket line on Wednesday to learn more about the issues in the strike.

Melia, an early care nurse who only recently began working at the UIH hospital told reporters, “We have to have safe staffing resources and the ability to provide safe care for our patients. Without that we don’t have what it takes to succeed and do our best for our patients.”

She added, “I want to make a career out of this job. I keep hearing my co-workers say that they love working here, but they can’t afford it! Of all the places I applied to, this offered me the lowest base wage. I want to make this something that I can continue to do, and we want to keep our best nurses.

“This is a public hospital, so a lot of the people coming here don’t have the same options to go to any of these fancy private hospitals with nice insurance

policies. So, when we try to give world-class care, it’s up to us. The patients that come in here trust us with their lives and we want to give them the best care we can.”

Melia and other nurses who spoke with the WSWS shared that in recent years nurses have experienced a sharp increase in instances of violence in the hospitals. Several nurses shared stories of abuse they had witnessed or experienced, including loaded guns being brought into patient rooms.

“Some nurses have trouble handling the toll this environment takes on them... we had two members of the bargaining team get assaulted during the bargaining process. For a while the hospital safety committee didn’t even have a nursing body representing it.” She continued, “To think that this is what we have to deal with on a daily basis to give the care we love giving is heart breaking.”

Alejandra, a veteran pediatrics nurse with 14 years of experience, also spoke with WSWS reporters. “We’re fighting for fair wages. We’re asking for fair wages to close the inflation gap. Our parking has gone up, our insurance has gone up, everything is going up except our wages.” She explained, “Currently we’re asking for 7 percent which I don’t think is a lot to ask, considering that our chief nursing officer got 20 percent.”

“In the pediatric clinic the violence that we see is more verbal abuse from parents and patients. But I feel if we had support and protections from our administration then we would be able to better serve our patients.”

Alejandra said that in her area, there can sometimes be over 200 patients scheduled at one time. “Currently

we have agency nurses that are helping to fill the gap,” She said, “but there’s no staffing ratios in the outpatient unit. So, if management was able to help assist us with getting a safe nurse to patient staff ratio that would be very helpful to help determine how many staff nurses are needed.”

She added, “We have over 20 specialties and we have sick kids, we have healthy kids, we have kids that need their vaccines, and they’re waiting in the waiting area but then there’s no room to put them for them to be seen by the doctors.”

“We all care about our patients. We all love our jobs and what we do. We are committed to working here and to our patients so the camaraderie the nurses have, the solidarity that we have, we go through things together.”

The UIH strike comes amid a wave of contract struggles and strikes by major healthcare systems throughout the US. At the University of California over 40,000 healthcare workers are set to go on strike next week over similar issues, including rapidly increasing cost of living. A strike of 4,500 technicians at the University of Michigan health system was set to begin Tuesday but was called at last minute by the United Michigan Medicine Allied Professionals (UMMAP) union.

In both cases the union bureaucracies are working to undermine rank-and-file demand for a strike and for serious improvements to their conditions. In Michigan UMMAP agreed to call off the strike after reaching a “memorandum of understanding” with Michigan Medicine.

The memorandum was not a tentative agreement and met none of the workers’ demands. Its purpose was to posture as if progress toward an agreement had been made to get workers back on the job without improving their conditions.

Similarly, the University of California strike is being planned by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) to last just two days. The purpose of this kind of “Hollywood strike” is to allow workers to blow off steam before sending them back on the job without a contract.

UIH workers also experienced these tactics in August when the INA limited the initial strike to just one week before ordering them back on the job.

Across the country healthcare workers are in a

powerful position to make serious gains that go well beyond the tiny raises proposed by the union bureaucrats. But to do so, rank-and-file committees must be organized to take the organization of the strike out of the hands of the INA and other union officials and into the hands of healthcare workers themselves.

With a rank-and-file committee nurses can put forward their own slate of demands based on what they need, not based on what the hospital administration says is acceptable. It can also combat the isolation of the strike, linking up with healthcare workers at other health systems in Chicago and nationwide. Nurses in Chicago should link up and coordinate their strikes together with healthcare workers in California, Michigan, and other states.

While healthcare workers are fighting to keep food on the table, the stock market has been soaring in preparation for Donald Trump to retake office as the next president. Plans by the billionaire financial oligarchy are well underway to prepare to boost their already enormous wealth.

These plans can only be paid for by increasing the exploitation of the working class. This will include further price increases, layoffs, and the slashing of benefits.

Nurses and healthcare workers do not have to accept these attacks on their living standards while the capitalist class reaps in trillions of dollars. There is plenty of money in society to provide nurses with high wages, full benefits, and to have proper staffing levels in the hospitals. It is, however, being hoarded by the rich.

To win the strike and make serious gains nurses in Chicago should join the Healthcare Workers Rank-and-File committee and fight to link up the strike in a joint struggle with all workers against the capitalist system.



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