

2 years after unionization, Belleville, New Jersey nurses remain without a contract

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11 December 2024

At a recent press conference, officials of 1199SEIU called on RWJBarnabas Health to negotiate a contract for about 500 nurses at Clara Maass Medical Center in Belleville, New Jersey. The event underscored the fact that the nurses still have not achieved their first contract, despite having voted to join the union in August 2022. This impasse has resulted not from any fault of the nurses but from the bankrupt strategy of the union.

Clara Maass Medical Center is a 472-bed hospital that provides services including cardiology, cancer care and emergency care. Its staff encompasses 2,100 employees, including more than 700 physicians. Clara Maass is only a few miles from Newark, which is the biggest city in New Jersey, as well as one of the poorest. The hospital is part of RWJBarnabas Health, which is the state's largest provider of medical care. In 2023, RWJBarnabas Health reported a total revenue of \$8.6 billion.

Like their counterparts worldwide, the Clara Maass nurses are demanding safe staffing, which is essential for providing the best patient care and for avoiding overwork and burnout. The nurses also are calling for higher pay, more sick time and greater job security. Finally, the nurses are demanding protection against exposure to illnesses.

“Although we go above and beyond the call of duty, it doesn't reflect in how we are treated by management or how we are paid,” Elizabeth Mendez-Corbin, a registered nurse at Clara Maass with 38 years' experience, told *Patch*. “As a result, nurse retention is very poor. We are demanding that management respect our rights and bargain in good faith.”

Hospital administrators have taken a hard line, becoming increasingly aggressive in rejecting nurses' criticisms and defending their own actions. Clara Maass has been able to remain stubbornly defiant because 1199SEIU is not organizing a real struggle of nurses for public health. The only goal of the union's leadership is

to establish a mutually beneficial working relationship with management. Instead of organizing a strike, the local 1199SEIU bureaucrats have held a few rallies outside the hospital during the past year. This modest and belated step was meant to keep control of the nurses' mounting frustration.

The union has also filed complaints with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which, like every other federal and state institution, upholds the supposed right of the corporations to profit from workers' labor. Officials have accused Clara Maass of surface bargaining (that is, participating in negotiations without intending to reach an agreement). They also have asserted that the hospital claims the right to change wages, hours, benefits and time off, as well as the right to subcontract nursing responsibilities. Milly Silva, 1199SEIU secretary-treasurer, stated that the hospital illegally fired a nurse and disciplined other nurses for supporting the union.

The nurses face a situation that strongly resembles that of the workers at Amazon's JFK8 fulfillment center in Staten Island, New York. More than two and a half years after having voted to join the Amazon Labor Union (ALU), the JFK8 workers are still laboring without a contract.

Like 1199SEIU, the ALU has focused its efforts on appeals to the NLRB and to Democratic politicians. Despite a favorable decision from the NLRB, Amazon still refuses to negotiate, and conditions at JFK8 are no better today than they were before the ALU was formed. Having long since dropped its claim to be distinct from the established trade unions, the ALU merged with the Teamsters in June.

In addition to their own experience, the JFK8 workers' experience shows the Clara Maass nurses that their fight cannot be waged through appeals to the NLRB or in alliance with the Democrats. Instead, the strategy must be to mobilize other healthcare workers, as well as workers

in other industries, in a common struggle. The ongoing strike wave shows the widespread opposition among workers that must be organized and directed consciously.

More than 300 mental health workers at Kaiser Permanente in Southern California have been on strike since October 21. These psychologists, social workers and other professionals are demanding better pay and more time for patient care. In November, almost 40,000 healthcare workers, technicians and other workers at the University of California struck for two days against understaffing and poor working conditions.

Earlier this month, 36,000 nurses, healthcare assistants and midwives in New Zealand staged an eight-hour strike against understaffing and government cuts to healthcare funding. This strike followed walkouts by junior doctors, laboratory workers and ambulance officers.

These strikes are not confined to the healthcare industry. About 55,000 Canada Post workers have been on strike for more than three weeks. They are fighting the Crown corporation's use of AI and automation to increase workloads, as well as cuts to pensions and benefits. And during the Black Friday shopping season, Amazon workers in more than 20 countries protested poverty wages and exceptionally dangerous working conditions.

These developments show the potential for a mass movement of the working class against exploitation. But the endless betrayals of the trade unions make plain that workers must exercise independent control over their own struggles. Moreover, workers must fight not only the companies and the trade union bureaucracy but also the entire political establishment that upholds the profit system.

By naming figures such as anti-vaccine zealot Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and far-right lawyer Pam Bondi to his cabinet, Donald Trump is preparing an extraordinary assault on public health and workers' rights. He intends to fund major corporate tax cuts by slashing Medicare, Medicaid and other social programs.

But Trump's Republican Party is not the only threat to the working class. The Democrats, which most of the trade unions loyally promote, is equally beholden to Wall Street. The administration of President Joe Biden showed that the Democrats' overriding priorities are the NATO proxy war against Russia and the expanding war in the Middle East. In the final days of his term, Biden is focused on escalating these wars, not on protecting workers' rights from the coming onslaught.

At their recent press conference, 1199SEIU leaders promoted US Senator Andy Kim and US Representative

Mikie Sherrill as the nurses' allies. These legislators are part of a group that the *World Socialist Web Site* has called "CIA Democrats," because they reflect the increasing dominance of the military and the intelligence agencies over this party.

Kim fully supports NATO's proxy war against Russia, the genocide of the Palestinians and preparations for a war against China, the biggest economic rival of the United States. In the US House of Representatives, he voted for a \$95 billion funding package for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan.

Sherrill, who is running for governor of New Jersey, has been a staunch supporter in Congress of President Joe Biden's agenda of austerity and war. A Navy veteran and consistent advocate of arming Ukraine, she met and was photographed with members of the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion in her home district in September 2022.

Such right-wing figures will not defend the interests of the Clara Maass nurses. Nor will 1199SEIU, which did nothing to support the nurses' strike at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital last year, even though that facility, like Clara Maass, is part of RWJBarnabas Health. Instead, the Clara Maass nurses must form an independent rank-and-file committee that is under their own democratic control.

This committee must formulate the nurses' demands according to their objective needs, not according to what RWJBarnabas is willing to concede. It must also develop a strategy to fight for and win these demands, including through united action with other healthcare workers. The fundamental question that the Clara Maass nurses face is the struggle to eliminate the profit motive from healthcare and to establish a system of socialized medicine that guarantees the highest level of care to all as a fundamental right.



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