

# Striking Providence nurses in Oregon speak out after rejecting latest contract

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*We invite medical workers at Providence and across the country to write to us about the conditions they face as a result of the ongoing social crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and the emerging threats to public health by the Trump administration.*

Last Friday, striking nurses at the Providence hospital network across Oregon voted to reject a contract proposal to end their four week strike by 83 percent. The sellout, worked out with the involvement of Democratic governor Tina Kotek, was essentially the same as the contract presented to them before the strike began.

The Oregon Nurses Association (ONA) apparatus was forced to call a strike after the contracts at eight Providence hospitals expired, including some contracts which ended more than a year ago. It follows more limited strikes that ended without contract settlements, including three-day strike last June at six locations that did not significantly impede hospital operations.

The strike is now in a new phase. As the statement from the *World Socialist Web Site* calling for a “No” vote explained, “The fact that a strike was even called in the first place speaks to the immense determination among nurses to secure what is rightfully theirs. They speak for the hundreds of thousands of other healthcare workers in the United States and the millions of workers more generally, all of whom face the same crushing stagnation of wages and living conditions as corporate executives continue to rake in tens of millions in salaries, bonuses and stock options.”

At the same time, it warned that in order for nurses to win their demands, there must be “a fight against the ONA bureaucracy, which has done nothing but undermine nurse’s strength in these fights. It did not call for united industrial action when contracts began expiring, it has allowed contract expirations to vary

among hospitals to keep different bodies of nurses isolated from each other, and in the current strike negotiated separate contracts for different sections of healthcare workers.”

On the picket line Monday, one worker said, “They gave us a contract offer in late December, and that’s the exact same thing they presented to us last week. The only change was providing a customer service agent for our Aetna insurance, after Providence kicked its nurses off Providence’s health insurance.

“All the wage factors stayed the same and none of the staffing issues were resolved. None of the nurses want this contract, we are all against it. And Providence was claiming that was the best they could do.

“The change of insurance has been very bad. A coworker’s husband’s chemotherapy went from \$500 a month to thousands of dollars a month. He had to go to hospice care as a result because they couldn’t afford it. Nobody’s getting the care that they need or are able to afford it. Yet Providence couldn’t at least give us a stipend to soften the blow of the crap they gave us.”

Another nurse talked about the impact of the “implementation” of an Oregon safe staffing law. “I work in the surgical oncology unit, where we take care of patients after they’ve had surgery and while they’re getting better. Two years ago, there was a 3:1 patient-to-nurse ratio and we’ve been that way for many years.

“And then the staffing law came in and we were required to have a break nurse. Instead of Providence giving us a break nurse, they started pulling nurses from other units, which means that the patient-to-nurse ratio went to 4:1. Since that happened, which has been almost a year, the number of times a patient has fallen has gone from zero to 15 falls a year, including six times a patient has been injured. And infection rates are way up as well.

“We are also supposed to have nurses’ aides, three on our floor, but about 20 days each month we’re short an aide, and they don’t allow us to staff for that, to have more workers than in the law in case we need someone to fill in. So then we’re not only at 4:1, we’re down aides so we can’t get patients medications on time, tend to any wounds and educate them on what they need to do to care for themselves when they leave the hospital.

“And when a patient’s health starts going bad and you have to do one-on-one care, your other patients have to fall onto your teammates and it just cascades. And this is a weekly, a day-to-day situation.”

“I feel like we’re on the edge of a collapse of the entire health care system,” one said in response to ongoing confirmation hearings of anti-vaccine quack Robert F. Kennedy Jr. “The idea of RFK being put in office is terrible. It’s a detriment to the health of the people and will be absolutely unsafe.”

Another noted, “You can’t just give infectious diseases a ‘break’ [like RFK Jr. has proposed]. That’s not how they work. They are always adapting and change. It’s very scary.”

Workers also commented on the attacks on immigrants and the preparations for mass deportations and raids by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents. “It’s a real question on everyone’s minds. We haven’t had to deal with it yet because we’re on strike, and we haven’t seen any ICE vehicles go on the [Providence Portland Medical Center] campus yet, but we’re worried. Our job is to fix people up and we don’t want any of that.”

An operating room nurse commented, “I don’t think we’d be the ones that would necessarily have to deal with it, but knowing these people, who knows? There’s really no limit to what might happen. Would they take someone who’s under anesthesia? That’s suddenly on the table.”

One nurse also commented on the essentially identical nature of the Democrats and Republicans. “The Democrats were attacking the anti-genocide protests for the last year and a half. We need even more protests now. I saw that there were some last week against Trump’s immigration policy and we need even more outcry at what Trump does.

“Trump has pushed so many executive orders that people don’t know what to pay attention to first, and

one of things they should be looking at is how he wants to build hotels on Gaza. He probably doesn’t even know where Gaza is on a map but he wants to make it ‘clean.’ It’s so upsetting.”



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