

Break the isolation of the Oregon nurses strike! For a counteroffensive by all workers against Trump and for the right to healthcare!

Bryan Dyne
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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.

Friday marks the end of the fifth week that just under 5,000 nurses, physicians and other healthcare workers have been on strike against the Providence hospital network. The main demands of workers, members of the Oregon Nurses Association (ONA), include higher wages, restored health benefits, retroactive pay and genuine safe staffing levels. These are all urgent to protect the health of both nurses and patients.

Safe staffing is a particular concern in the face of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of the H5N1 bird flu, which have the potential to inundate the healthcare system with seriously ill patients and overwhelm healthcare workers at Providence and beyond.

The nurses' demands have been met with nothing but hostility from Providence. The management has presented two nearly identical contracts, one before the strike and one four weeks in. Neither address nurses' demands. To justify its proposals, management asserted that both followed the safe staffing laws of Oregon. The *World Socialist Web Site* has already exposed this law for being wholly inadequate regarding what caregivers on the hospital floor actually need.

The second offer presented by Providence was also a trial balloon to test workers' militancy and determination. Its almost identical terms with the previous offer was a deliberate provocation and warning that it was hardening its position. The hospital network is determined to bring workers to heel for daring to strike.

Providence management believes it can outlast the strike. It is currently spending an estimated \$25 million a week on strikebreakers to keep hospital operations running. According to the company's financial statements for the third quarter of 2024, it has a cash and investment reserve of \$7.8 billion, all of which it has made by maximizing profit off its workforce.

Providence also knows it can count on the state Democrats, including Governor Tina Kotek, to work with the ONA to keep the strike contained. The second "offer" from Providence was only issued after Kotek directed the ONA and Providence to meet.

Providence management is also banking on the isolation of the strike by the larger national unions. The walkout was the first major strike of 2025 and therefore of the Trump administration. The AFL-CIO and its

affiliated unions have blocked a general offensive against Trump's attempt to set up a presidential dictatorship, his unconstitutional anti-immigrant attacks and gutting of federal programs and jobs.

The International Longshore Association, Teamsters and United Auto Workers have blocked strikes by tens of thousands of workers on the docks, at Costco, Daimler Trucks and other companies. The Teamsters' Sean O'Brien, UAW's Shawn Fain and American Federation of Teachers' Randi Weingarten have pledged to collaborate with Trump and back his pick for Labor Secretary, Republican Congresswoman Lori Chavez-DeRemer of Oregon.

Despite the sabotage by the union bureaucracy, there is a growing movement of opposition in the working class. This includes protests in defense of immigrants across the country, the strike by 10,000 King Soopers grocery workers in Colorado and the two-day strike by 600 nurses at the University Medical Center (UMC) in New Orleans. Upcoming battles are also anticipated by tens of thousands of nurses and healthcare workers in California, New England, and around the country.

The rebellion by the nurses, physicians and other workers at Providence must be the catalyst for a far broader movement to defend all the democratic and social rights of the working class of all races, nationalities and immigration status.

The first step for Providence nurses is to set up a rank-and-file strike committee, which is democratically controlled by the ranks, and vigilantly defend the will of the members against attempts to countermand it by the ONA, AFT and AFL-CIO officials.

A fighting unity must be established with the full 22,000-strong membership of the ONA, healthcare workers at other hospital networks, including Kaiser Permanente, Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU), PeaceHealth and others, as well as other critical sections of workers in the region, including logistics workers at UPS, autoworkers at Daimler, aerospace workers at Boeing and teachers across Oregon and the Pacific Northwest.

The committee must popularize and fight for a series of demands that are critical to win the strike.

Demand strike pay of \$750 a week!

In the face of Providence's well-financed campaign of provocation and strike-breaking by hospital management, Providence nurses must have the resources to sustain themselves.

At present, strikers are not receiving strike pay from the Oregon Nurses Association (ONA) or its parent union, the AFT. Instead, strikers must demonstrate "financial hardship" and explore other "avenues of relief" before being allowed access to the ad hoc union hardship fund. The union has also set up a GoFundMe page to receive donations, which has so far raised about \$125,000, which is nowhere near what nurses need after being on strike for five weeks.

Already, nurses are being forced to find temporary work and outside income to sustain themselves. ONA officials have recommended nurses get help through the Oregon Food Bank and other local housing, food and healthcare nonprofits.

It is fair to ask if the top officers of the ONA, including the six individuals on the union's board who received the bulk of the \$1.3 million in salaries and other compensation in 2023, have suspended their pay for the duration of the strike.

The AFT, moreover, has ample resources to pay strike benefits to ONA members. Randi Weingarten, who has been AFT president for 27 years without ever facing a membership vote, is a multi-millionaire, with an annual salary that has long ranged around half a million dollars.

As a leading member of the Democratic National Committee she has made sure that workers' dues money has been handed over to the Democrats who, despite their occasional "pro-worker" rhetoric, are a pro-Wall Street and pro-war party, which unwaveringly defends the "right" of giant corporations to control the healthcare system.

The AFT spent more than \$16 million on lobbying in 2024, including \$4.5 million on the Senate Majority PAC and \$2.1 million on the House Majority PAC, giving money to the same capitalist politicians who have been attacking education and public health for decades.

To finance the Providence strike, workers should demand the suspension of pay to top AFT leaders and the squandering of dues money to elect Democrats who paved the way for Trump's return to power and are now cowering before him.

In the distant past, this is what unions did. According to one author, during the 1970 GM strike, "the union ordered a 50 percent pay cut for all union staff members. UAW President Leonard Woodcock and other top officers agreed to go off the union payroll for the duration of the strike. It was further decided that once the strike fund ran out, all union staff would receive no pay."

Instead, the AFT apparatus has offered loans and credit card assistance and mortgage counseling for striking nurses. It also has suggested nurses borrow from their 401(k)s to stay afloat during the strike.

Nurses should demand:

- The ONA and AFT must provide nurses with \$750 per week strike pay for the duration of the strike.
- Union bureaucrats should have their pay reduced to what nurses are receiving in strike pay.
- Expand the strike! Mobilize the 22,000 members of the ONA, the 2 million members of the AFT and broader sections of the working class to support the strike!

political counteroffensive by the working class

There is immense support for the strike in the state. UPS workers at Portland's Swan Island, who are fighting against the closing of an industrial hub, expressed support for Providence nurses. "The CEO of Providence is a multi-millionaire," one driver told the WSWS. "The company is not hurting for money in any way.

"These are long-brewing issues for the nurses. Their jobs are very stressful and they're understaffed. There are a lot of issues that just aren't being addressed. And now, every public health regulation is being destroyed."

Nurses at Providence are not just fighting for themselves, but for their patients, for public health and the whole working class, which is being crushed by inflation, skyrocketing household debt and which now confronts a would-be dictator in the White House.

The assets controlled by the ONA and AFT apparatus belong to the workers, not the high-paid bureaucrats and politicians who talk out of both sides of their mouth and then back Wall Street bailouts and war. These resources must be used to sustain strikers and prevent management from starving workers into submission.

To fight for these demands, nurses must set up a rank-and-file committee, acting under the umbrella of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). In contrast to the union apparatus, rank-and-file committees are democratically run organizations in which workers' power, not that of the corporations or bureaucracies, enforces what workers need on the picket lines and on the hospital, clinic and workplace floors.

A rank-and-file committee will not bow to what Providence and the Democratic Party politicians claim they can afford, but what nurses and your patients need.

This critical battle can and must be won, but everything depends on the initiative of the rank and file. You have shown your courage on the picket lines by rejecting the sellout contract brought back by the ONA officials, now it is necessary for the most class conscious and militant healthcare workers to guide this fight to victory.

To join the fight for rank-and-file committees and power, fill out the form below.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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