

Portland, Oregon city council postures in defense of striking Providence nurses

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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 on public health by the Trump administration.

On Monday, 11 Portland city councillors wrote a letter to Providence Chief Executive Jennifer Burrows and President and CEO Erik Wexler in a further intervention by the Oregon Democrats to shut down the nearly six-week-long strike by about 5,000 Providence nurses.

The letter asserted that the councillors “stand with the thousands of healthcare professionals currently on strike” and that Providence should “step up” and continue bargaining with the Oregon Nurses Association (ONA).

In response, Providence agreed to two days of closed-door negotiations, Tuesday and Wednesday, the results of which have yet to be publicly disclosed.

The nurses have been conducting a powerful strike since January 10 against Providence Health and Services, a hospital network of 51 hospitals that services the Western United States. The walkout straddled the outgoing Biden administration and new Trump administration and is currently the largest strike in the United States.

The letter by the city councillors, as well as a second letter written by the twelfth member, is a maneuver by the Democrats and the ONA bureaucracy to give the appearance that the union bureaucracy is doing something even as the ONA, its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers and the AFL-CIO continue to isolate the strikers and try to starve them into submission.

It is a follow-up to the demand by Oregon Governor Tina Kotek three weeks ago that Providence and the

ONA again meet. The result from that meeting was the sellout contract presented by the union apparatus, which rank-and-file nurses resoundingly voted down by 83 percent.

Conditions are very ripe to expand the strike into a broader movement by the working class in the Pacific Northwest, nationally and internationally. On Monday, 800 nurses at Geisinger Health System in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania—owned by the healthcare giant Kaiser Permanente—began a five-day strike. Nurses there are fighting for essentially the same things that nurses at Providence are: low pay, high healthcare costs and short-staffing.

The fact that Providence nurses have stayed out for so long—and, one should add, without strike pay from the ONA—gives some indication of just how untenable their situation is.

Nurses and healthcare workers throughout the country are also facing a concerted onslaught against public health by the Trump administration, placing their struggles in direct political opposition to the new oligarchic regime. As a key part of Trump’s attempts to set up a presidential dictatorship, he has installed the notorious anti-vaccine quack Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as secretary for Health and Human Services. This is a man who once pledged to “give infectious disease a break for about eight years.”

It is telling that the letter made no mention of these greater threats to nurses’ jobs and their profession. It is part and parcel of the role of the Democrats in playing down the danger of dictatorship, fascism and war embodied in Trump and fellow plunderer Elon Musk. Nor was there any mention of the provocative message Providence sent to striking nurses last week confirming that they will lose their health benefits at the end of the month.

The fight by Providence nurses to achieve their demands cannot be left in the hands of union bureaucrats or capitalist politicians. Instead, striking nurses must form rank-and-file committees at each hospital to establish lines of communication to share information between strikers and other healthcare workers at all facilities, coordinate actions and enforce the democratic will of the rank and file.

These committees, organized under the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), would fight for workers' control at the workplace, including enforceable staffing ratios.

Such committees would also be built independently of the trade union bureaucracy and pseudo-left outfits like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which endorsed two of the sitting Portland councillors in the most recent election. The DSA and union bureaucrats are complicit in the current staffing shortage faced by Oregon nurses, and union officials across the country have expressed support for Trump's nationalist "America First" policies and attacks on immigrants.

A key reason to build the committees is to reinforce the picket lines and expand the strike. As a result of the lack of strike pay from the ONA and AFT, reports have begun to emerge that some nurses are beginning to cross the picket line.

That any nurses who stood with their brothers and sisters for weeks are now crossing the picket lines is entirely the fault of the national union officials, who have not supported the strike. The assets of the AFT are in the hundreds of millions and could easily provide for \$750 a week strike pay and allow nurses to mount a serious fight.

If the union apparatus is left in charge of the strike, the pickets will continue to hemorrhage until Providence is in a position to bring back the rejected sellout, with certain cosmetic changes, which union officials will inevitably say is the "best" nurses are going to get.

That is the plan of the corporations, the big business politicians and the union bureaucrats. Rank-and-file workers need to counter with their own strategy. That begins by creating a new voice for the fighting nurses, outlining their non-negotiable demands and turning this strike into a catalyst for a far broader movement to fight for the right to free, high-quality healthcare for all and

an end to for-profit medicine.



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