

ONA forces through sellout contract for nurses at Providence

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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 Trump administration's war on public health and science.

On Monday night, the Oregon Nurses Association (ONA) announced that nurses at Providence Health & Services had ratified their latest contract proposal, bringing to an end a 46-day-long strike by 5,000 nurses and other medical workers. The ONA bureaucracy said their deal passed by a 75-25 percent vote.

Despite the predictable claims of a “historic” victory, the contract pushed through by the ONA bureaucracy, after several attempts, is an abject betrayal. The wage increases do not obtain what nurses are earning at Providence commensurate with what others in the area earn, such as at Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU), nor do they make up for the lost wages due to the inflation of rent, food, fuel, utilities and other basic necessities. The contract also does not provide for more paid time off.

The chief demand of nurses, to improve staffing ratios, has not been seriously addressed. Instead, the ratios are largely left to Oregon's safe staffing law, crafted in collaboration with the ONA, state hospital networks including Providence, the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the Democratic Party. In many hospital units, the law has actually allowed Providence to *reduce* the number of nurses and nursing assistants and, consequently, increase profits for the corporations and executives.

Oregon Governor Tina Kotek and the Portland City Council each intervened to keep the strike from expanding, demanding that the ONA and Providence shut down the strike as quickly as possible. The Democrats include among them DSA members who

have several seats in the Oregon state legislature and Portland city council.

The previous deal brought back by the ONA was rejected by the rank and file in a 84 percent no vote earlier this month. The ONA and its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers, responded to this rebuke by doubling down on their efforts to isolate the strike, starve workers into submission and ram through another deal, which was virtually identical to the one workers overwhelmingly rejected.

Nurses were kept out on the picket line for six weeks without strike pay, despite the \$35 billion in assets managed by the AFL-CIO. The bureaucracy also made no move to cover nurses' health insurance, which Providence announced was to end on February 28.

The union bureaucracy did everything to prevent striking nurses from uniting their struggles, including at the strike of hundreds of nurses at Geisinger hospitals in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania and the 20,000 University of California nurse case managers, mental health counselors, pharmacists and lab technicians walking out February 26.

The money that was thrown into the ratified contract, 75 percent of retroactive pay for those whose contracts expired before December 2024 and a \$2,500 taxable bonus only for those at Providence Portland Medical Center and Providence Seaside, are nothing but band-aids. To ensure Providence incurs the least cost possible, the retroactive pay will be paid out in three installments. The last will be paid out in October, a final punishment for those who have been forced to leave Providence for better pay elsewhere or the nursing profession altogether.

One nurse commented on social media, “I’m one of those who will leave in the coming months. Unfortunately, in the time frame I’m looking at, I’ll be

gone before I get the other 25% of my retro. In the town hall, our bargaining team stated breaking up retro was a means to prevent a mass exodus which was agreed upon by both ONA and prov. I'm pissed they took that choice away from us. I'll be gone by October regardless."

While ONA officials tout that 10 bargaining units "now align with expiration or wage reopener dates within three months of each other," they neglect to mention that this does not include Portland Medical Center, where more than 1,500 nurses went out on strike. Contrary to the claim that in the future there will be a "collective" voice, the decision to have a separate expiration date for nearly a third of Providence nurses serves only to divide workers.

Another worker wrote scathingly, "Gotta maintain the lie that ONA delivered on any bargaining items and that members are happy with the contracts."

The comments reflect the class disconnect between the rank and file and the bureaucracy. Throughout the entire contract negotiation process, going as far back as December 2023, when the contracts at Hood River, Newburg, Willamette Falls and St. Vincent expired, the union leaderships sought to avoid a strike across the hospital network, keeping any action to limited walkouts.

It was only when the contracts at Portland Medical Center expired in December 2024 and the rebellion of nurses was brewing that the ONA felt compelled to finally call joint action, in particular involving the two largest facilities, Portland and St. Vincent.

The powerful strike and resilience of Oregon nurses in the face of the union bureaucracy's sabotage is an expression of the growing militancy and political radicalization of healthcare workers and the working class as a whole. This is being accelerated by the Trump administration's attack on public health and science, including the appointment of anti-vaccine quack Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the mass firing of federal workers by fascist Elon Musk, including 10 percent of those who work at the CDC and the National Institutes of Health.

The gutting of essential social program to finance more tax cuts for the oligarchy and wars, is driving tens of millions more workers, including those who voted for Trump, into major class battles.

But the lessons of the Oregon nurses strike must be

learned to prepare healthcare workers and others for the coming struggle. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained from the beginning, the only way for workers to fight for their demands is through developing new organizations of working class self-determination, which are independent of the union bureaucracies and both corporate-controlled parties.

This means developing rank-and-file committees to transfer power from the union apparatus to the workers on the hospital and clinic floors. Providence workers must take up this fight now to enforce safe staffing levels, protect patient safety and end burnout.

This struggle is inseparable from a political fight against both capitalist parties, which defend the giant corporations and the for-profit health care systems. The right to free, high-quality healthcare will not be achieved through Bernie Sanders' pious wishes for Medicare for All, let alone a vote for the Democrats in 2026. What is needed is a political movement of the working class whose aim is to replace the government of the oligarchs with a workers government and the socialist transformation of society.



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