

Strike by 950 nurses in Madison, Wisconsin over workplace safety and wages

Bill Shaw
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On Tuesday, 950 nurses employed by UnityPoint Health-Meriter Hospital in Madison, Wisconsin, launched a five-day strike, the first by nurses at the hospital. They are demanding improvements in workplace safety for both staff and patients, higher staffing ratios and increased pay.

Striking nurse Audrey Willems Van Dijk, speaking at a press conference launching the strike, said, “We have been stretched a little bit more thin, we have worked a little bit harder, we are constantly staying extra to help our coworkers and our patients, and it feels like management is taking advantage of our love of our job.”

The striking nurses are members of the Wisconsin chapter of Service Employees International Union or SEIU Wisconsin, whose membership comprises approximately 7,000 healthcare and service industry workers in the state.

The fact that the Meriter strike is occurring in Madison is significant. Act 10, passed over a decade ago through tactics of questionable legality under former Governor Scott Walker, stripped collective bargaining rights from nurses at UW Health in Madison. That law sparked mass working class protests at the state Capitol building, and broad support for a statewide general strike against the bill.

These nurses currently have a case before the Wisconsin Supreme Court to force the health system to recognize their union. In addition, SEIU Wisconsin is a plaintiff in a separate lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of Act 10. Last year, a judge ruled parts of the law unconstitutional, although an appeal is still pending.

The strike also takes place amid numerous struggles of healthcare workers nationally.

Eight hundred workers at Butler Hospital in

Providence, Rhode Island, have been on strike since May 15th. The SEIU announced Wednesday that it was returning to the bargaining table. New York-Presbyterian Hospital also has announced plans to lay off 1,000 workers earlier this month.

Hundreds of nurses from two southern California hospitals, MemorialCare Long Beach Medical Center and Miller Children’s and Women’s Hospital, and at Alhambra Hospital Medical Center, went on strike for one day last week.

However, the union bureaucracy is doing everything it can to limit and isolate them. The SEIU just blocked a strike of nursing home caregivers in Connecticut last Friday, rather than link up that strike with the nurses in Wisconsin. Hundreds of nursing home workers in the Buffalo metropolitan area of western New York went on strike May 20 but the SEIU limited that walkout to seven days.

The current contract expired on March 16, but closed-door talks between SEIU Wisconsin and hospital management have been ongoing since January. Nurses said that they chose to strike now because management has not answered their demands for increased workplace security and higher staffing ratios. The nurses are insisting on the installation of metal detectors and workplace improvements. The union and hospital management were set to resume talks Thursday while the strike is ongoing.

In response to nurses’ demands for minimum staffing ratios, hospital management rolled out the typical objection, saying that writing specific staffing ratios in a contract would “...limit flexibility, reduce nurse autonomy and lead to unintended outcomes—potentially affecting the ability to adjust to patient needs and staff availability in real time.”

Of course, staffing ratios would do no such thing. It is

always possible to bring on additional nurses to meet demand over and above minimum safe staffing levels. This is evidenced by the fact that Meriter is currently using traveling nurses as scabs during the strike, having onboarded them over Memorial Day weekend.

The fact that SEIU Wisconsin called a mere five-day strike shows the union bureaucracy is not willing to wage a protracted struggle on behalf of workers. Nor has SEIU Wisconsin published on its website the specific wage increases and staffing ratios, if any, that it is seeking. It could therefore declare victory on any changes at all, no matter how insignificant.

Democratic politicians are using the Meriter strike to create the appearance of supporting workers, while supporting ruling class policies against them. Mark Pocan, whose 2nd Congressional District of Wisconsin includes Madison, made an appearance on the picket lines on the second day of the strike. Senator Bernie Sanders tweeted in support of the nurses.

These two politicians have a long track record of directing working class resistance back into the dead end of the Democratic Party, which is fully complicit in the ruling class attack on workers. Pocan, a member and “chair emeritus” of the House “progressive” caucus, has been a reliable vote for increasing militarism and war. He voted for the \$61 billion military aid package to Ukraine, an \$8 billion military aid package to Taiwan, and a resolution committing the United States to “unwavering support” for Israel.

Sanders has been resolute in supporting Israel and repeating the lie that “Israel has a right to defend itself.”

The Democratic Party has enabled the unprecedented assault on science and public health by President Trump and his Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), Robert F. Kennedy Jr. They have sought to restrict opposition to toothless letter-writing campaigns and stunts from the floor of Congress, because they are far more terrified of mass action on the part of workers, healthcare or otherwise, to oppose the assault.

These attacks are generating enormous and explosive anger among healthcare workers in particular and the working class more broadly. The scorched earth policies being implemented at HHS—such as the elimination of the Healthcare Infection Control Practices Advisory Committee and the wholesale undermining of vaccines, including recent rollbacks of

COVID-19 vaccine recommendations—will make the situation facing nurses immeasurably more dire, with more and sicker patients.

Objectively, both Meriter and UW Health nurses confront a fight not just against a single intransigent health system administration, or a single state’s suppression of collective bargaining rights, but a political struggle against a ruling class which is seeking to establish a dictatorship, destroy public health and further enrich itself, no matter the cost in lives.

This struggle cannot be won through corrupt union bureaucracies, support for politicians of either party, or legal challenges. Meriter and UW Health nurses must take direct control of their struggles by forming rank-and-file committees that are democratically elected.

These committees must then deliberate free from external influences including management pressure and the sabotage of politicians and the union bureaucracy. The committee can then adopt clear demands, including specific percentage wage increases, staffing ratios and security measures. In the case of Meriter, the committee should also demand extension of the strike on an open-ended basis.

These rank-and-file committees must then unite with other such committees across the country and in other industries through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to effect coordinated action. Only in this manner can the struggle against the ruling class and its full-scale assault on science and health be won.



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