

# Union calls off strike of 350 New Jersey nurses, attempts to impose contract

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The Health Professionals and Allied Employees (HPAE) union called off a strike of 350 nurses at Southern Ocean Medical Center in Manahawkin, New Jersey on Sunday, June 8. Fewer than 24 hours before the strike was scheduled to begin, union officials announced a tentative agreement that allegedly “includes enforceable nurse-to-patient safe staffing ratios, wages and other benefits.” They provided no details about the agreement, however. A ratification vote will be held on June 11, which means that the nurses will not have enough time to read and consider the agreement carefully.

All these signs indicate that HPAE is trying to push its members into ratifying a contract that will not meet their core demands. The workers must reject this tentative agreement on principle. The only way that the Southern Ocean nurses can wage a genuine struggle against the hospital administration is by forming a rank-and-file committee that is independent of the union, which is collaborating with management against them.

Southern Ocean Medical Center is in southern New Jersey on a highway that leads to the resort communities of Long Beach Island. Last year, the hospital began a \$31.4 million construction project that will include new operating rooms. Southern Ocean Medical Center is part of the Hackensack Meridian Health healthcare network, which is the largest provider in New Jersey. The network includes 18 hospitals and employs 7,000 physicians and more than 36,000 other workers.

The nurses’ main demand, which is being raised by healthcare workers around the world, is improved staffing levels. Data consistently indicate that adequate hospital staffing is associated with better patient outcomes and reduced risks of medical errors, overwork and burnout. The nurses are also demanding

improved wages and benefits.

In April, the nurses at Southern Ocean voted by 98 percent to authorize a strike. This near-unanimity reflects not only the unacceptable conditions that the nurses face, but also their determination to fight to change them.

But after the contract expired on April 30, HPAE defied the nurses’ will and kept them on the job while union officials continued negotiating with management behind closed doors. Moreover, HPAE kept the Southern Ocean nurses separate from 500 nurses and other healthcare workers at Bergen New Bridge Medical Center in Paramus. The contract for the latter workers, who are also HPAE members, expired on May 31. The Bergen New Bridge workers voted to strike, but the union announced a last-minute tentative agreement, thus blocking them from joining the Southern Ocean nurses in what would have been a more powerful joint struggle.

This sabotage is typical of HPAE, which has a history of dividing its members, preventing strikes and rushing ratification votes. In September 2024, contracts expired for about 900 nurses and 500 social workers, laboratory workers, IT workers and clinical staff at University Hospital in Newark. These workers all belong to HPAE, although they are in different locals. HPAE did not bother to hold a strike vote, instead keeping all its members on the job. Moreover, the union blocked a united struggle of its University Hospital members, thus weakening their leverage; HPAE announced a tentative agreement for the nurses while continuing to negotiate one for the other workers. Only two days after announcing this agreement, HPAE forced the nurses to vote on it. The unions hold such snap votes when they intend to impose concessions on workers before they realize what is happening.

HPAE's actions at Palisades Medical Center and Bergen were even more egregious. On June 1, 2024, the contract for about 800 nurses and other workers at this hospital expired, along with contracts for 1,500 nurses at Cooper University Health Care in Camden and 800 nurses at Englewood Hospital in Englewood. All these workers are members of HPAE, and the strike votes at all three facilities were nearly unanimous. Hours before the contracts expired, HPAE announced tentative agreements with Cooper University Health Care and Englewood Hospital, leaving the workers at Palisades Medical Center isolated. HPAE did not submit the required 10 days' strike notice to Palisades management, showing that it had no intention of respecting its members' will. Having kept the workers on the job without a contract for more than a week, the union announced a tentative agreement that it did not allow its members to see until the day of the vote. This was a flagrantly antidemocratic act on the part of HPAE, aimed at coercing workers into ratifying a contract that they otherwise would reject.

The conspiracy against the Southern Ocean nurses is taking place amid a frontal assault on science and public health by the administration of President Donald Trump. The Department of Health and Human Services has lost one-third of its budget under Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a notorious conspiracy theorist and opponent of vaccines. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institutes of Health have had their budgets slashed by at least 40 percent. The CDC and the Food and Drug Administration have lost 20 percent of their employees. These budget cuts and mass layoffs are an attempt by the ruling class to eliminate decades, if not a century, of gains in public health. The money thus saved will fund tax cuts for the wealthy and increased military spending in preparation for war with China.

Although the Republicans are leading these attacks, the Democrats are equally committed to them. The latter have confined themselves to voicing occasional objections and avoided mounting any serious opposition to Trump's wrecking operation. The differences between the parties are limited to tactical questions. The Democrats and Republicans alike represent the interests of Wall Street, the intelligence agencies and the military. They are united on a program of genocide and imperialist war, for which they intend

to make the working class pay through austerity and mass layoffs.

HPAE, along with the other trade unions, seeks to block workers from breaking with these capitalist parties. President Debbie White continually encourages workers to appeal to legislators to enact laws that will guarantee safe staffing, but the bipartisan onslaught against health reveals these encouragements to be a conscious deception. White and her counterparts in the other trade unions have relationships not only with the corporations, but also with the Democratic Party. They seek to maintain these relationships and the material advantages that go with them by preventing an independent struggle of the working class.

The nurses at Southern Ocean must initiate such a struggle if they are to win the safe staffing and improved wages and benefits that they need. The first step must be the rejection of the tentative agreement that HPAE is attempting to force them into ratifying. Next, the nurses must form a rank-and-file committee that is independent of HPAE and of both capitalist parties. This committee will be the forum in which nurses can develop a fighting strategy. It will enable them to end the isolation that HPAE has imposed on them by reaching out to other healthcare workers for assistance. At bottom, the fight at Southern Ocean is inseparable from the struggle against for-profit healthcare and for a socialist system that guarantees healthcare as a human right.



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