“It’s us against the executives”: Striking nurses in New York City speak from the picket line

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Nearly 15,000 nurses in New York City walked off the job Monday morning in the first major strike of the new year. Nurses at New York Presbyterian, Mount Sinai and Montefiore hospital systems staffed boisterous picket lines throughout the day, carrying strike placards and homemade signs that provided a glimpse of the conditions they are struggling against. “Closets are for clothes, not for babies,” one sign read. “Who takes health care away from ‘heroes’?” another asked.

The walkout, which was pared back by the New York State Nurses Association’s last-minute deals with eight hospitals, is nonetheless the largest nurses’ strike in history in New York City. It comes three years after the last major nurses’ strike in the city, which involved two of the same hospital systems, Mount Sinai and Montefiore. A key issue then, as now, is unsafe staffing levels that have led to impossible conditions for nurses.

Not only have staffing levels remained dangerous for patients and untenable for workers, but the hospital executives are demanding workers accept cuts to their own health benefits. They have also refused to address safety concerns, which have increased as the social crisis in New York City has deepened and nationwide, as the Trump administration spearheads the dismantling of the public health infrastructure.

WSWS reporters spoke with striking nurses on the picket line at New York Presbyterian Monday about the conditions that have provoked this struggle and the political issues behind them.

A nurse at New York Presbyterian pointed to the atrocious staffing levels and the impacts on care. “Currently, we have patients that wait in the recovery room for up to two days because they’re willing to pack them in, but they’re not willing to account for how many beds are in the hospital. And that results in patients waiting, that results in patients suffering, and it results in nurses not being able to help you.

“I think it’s incredibly inappropriate to make massive cuts to health. Why should nurses not have healthcare, while we are working during COVID conditions, while we’re working during extreme influenza conditions, while the EDs are packed? Your family members should not be sitting in the recovery room next to somebody with influenza when your family member just waited six months to a year to get a solid organ transplant. That is a gift, and you should not have to squander it because the hospital decides that you are not important.”

Asked about the political situation where unlimited funds are made available for war and advancing dictatorship at home while healthcare and other workers are forced to sacrifice, she responded, “I don’t support any money going to war. Nurses are here to protect you. Nurses are here to save you, and nurses will always be here to save you. It’s corporations that are trying to stuff the money out of you and are trying to make you suffer. Nurses stand with you, we want you to stand with us. This is just the beginning. If we can do it, you can do it. Know your worth.”

A neurosurgery nurse explained, “We’re here, we’re having the strike specifically for fair wages, for a patient-to-nurse ratio, safety for our patients and to hopefully negotiate our contract. We do a lot of advocating for our patients, a lot of advocating for people in the hospital, and we don’t think there’s much advocacy for us. We have to advocate for ourselves,

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and that's how we're doing this strike."

A veteran nurse of 24 years added, "It's just heartbreaking that we were recognized as 'heroes' back in the pandemic. And now we're treated just like nobody. And management didn't even show up at the negotiation table. So, it's just right for us to preserve our rights."

A nurse in the postpartum unit said, "We're fighting for a fair contract, better staffing, especially for our babies and our high-risk moms. We got a lot of patients with high acuity so we're fighting for better staffing. Also we're fighting for our health insurance and our pension and just better safety for all of us."

Discussing the broader context in which the nurses strike is unfolding, she commented, "I feel like it's very brave for anyone who goes on strike or protests, let's say for the ICE raid. It takes a lot to be brave and fight for what you want and what you believe in."

Another striker said, "We, the people, have to remember that it is us against executives that want to make us feel like we are voiceless and powerless. If we remember that we actually do have a voice, across all different workforces, across all states and countries, and that when we unite together there's nothing that we can't do and there's nothing that we can't accomplish."

She added, "We have managers and executives who are making millions and millions of dollars. The hospital in 2024 made over $10 billion in revenue. And we, as we stand here today, are asking for management to pour back into their nurses, pour back into their staff, pour back into their team, so we can continue pouring into our patients.

"I think a really big thing that's uniting all of us is the fight for patient rights and patient safety. There's been a narrative that's being pushed out that the nurses here are only like fighting for greedy purposes ... but that's the exact opposite of what we're here to do. I think it's incredibly hypocritical, especially because the reason why we are outside is because management has pushed us here. We have not left our patients. We are outside here today fighting to get back to you guys."

Another commented, "We're asking for job security so AI doesn't take over nursing because that is definitely not possible. We want a safe work environment. At one of our local hospitals a patient came and tried to attack a nurse in the ED. We are risking our lives every day, trying to save patients. So we want to ensure that we're cared for as well.

"[Management is] trying to silence us," she continued. "It's trying to make sure that no one on the outside knows what's really happening. As a nurse, we're suffering inside, but our voices need to be heard now.

"We see a lot of horrific things every day, but we have to pretend like every day is fine, but that's clearly not the case."

"We're overrun," one striker said. "We're always at work taking care of others, and then we're expected to not fight for ourselves. That's why we're here, fighting for a fair contract. They're trying to attack our healthcare. It's not fair that we put everything that we have to take care of all of New York City, but then our health is what's being questioned.

"These companies are concerned about their profits," the nurse continued. They're not concerned about their employees, and they're not concerned about their patients because this wouldn't have gotten this far. They would have been at negotiations in good faith, and we would have never gotten here. None of these nurses want to be here, but we are.

"Healthcare has been a problem in this city for a long time, so we need to try and tackle it, but government needs to step in to help. The problem is we don't have what we need. We get the job done, but we get it done because of our patients. At the end of the day they do need to be taken care of, so we make it work. But after a while of making it work, you end up with scraps and scraps of scraps.

"You can only do so much with what little we're being given, and even with that we're making it work. So that just goes to show our commitment towards the community, towards our patients. If only we saw that same kind of commitment from these big hospitals."

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