

“We haven’t been here for five weeks now for no reason”: New York City nurses speak out on the picket line

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The 4,200 nurses at New York-Presbyterian Hospital have entered the sixth week of their strike. Last week, they delivered a strong rebuke to the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) by rejecting a thoroughly inadequate tentative agreement. NYSNA officials had ignored the executive committee’s recommendation and broken the union’s bylaws by bringing the agreement to a vote. The bureaucrats’ goal was to end the strike on the hospital’s terms and send everyone back to work.

The anger and distrust that this flagrant betrayal provoked still lingers among the nurses. Those who recently spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* under condition of anonymity showed a determination to keep fighting until they have won their demands.

“I’ve been out here for my patients and for my coworkers,” said a recovery room nurse. “The job that we do on some days feels impossible.... I worked through COVID, I’ve worked hurt, and I do it because I want to show up for my colleagues and my patients. If they don’t give us the proper amount of staffing, the care that the patients receive is substandard, but also the support that we’re able to give each other is substandard.”

The need for safe staffing has been the prime motivation for the strike, “and it wasn’t addressed [in the tentative agreement],” the nurse continued. “The way that New York-Presbyterian and NYSNA leadership were portraying this to the public is that the amount of staff that they’re offering us is adequate for the units that are in critical need, and it absolutely is not.”

“They did not put wording to enforce the safe staffing,” said a recovery room and intensive care unit

(ICU) nurse. “They say they’re going to hire five nurses and then they say, ‘Well, we don’t have the finances now. It’s going to happen next year.’” Safe staffing requires the hiring of full-time nurses, not the scheduling of travel nurses to cover the occasional shift, she continued. “There has to be language that is going to say, ‘Yes, we’re going to hold on to the promise that we’re giving you.’”

Layoffs have worsened the staffing situation at New York-Presbyterian in the past year: about 65 nurses across the health system’s three campuses lost their jobs. “They closed units without prior notification,” said the recovery room nurse. “The contract which the leadership was trying to force on us, in a rushed 24-hour vote via SurveyMonkey without prior notification from our executive committee, didn’t include language that would project our jobs. New York-Presbyterian is trying to eliminate NYSNA nursing positions and fill them with nonunion people.”

“They did lay off people last May and did not even give them severance pay,” said a nurse practitioner. “They claimed it was due to healthcare cuts by the Trump administration. But the way the union acted was like they were supporting the hospital management’s methods. All nurses should be out together. I am willing to go back when the hospital is willing to accept our demands.”

Many nurses rejected the tentative agreement because of the way NYSNA overrode the executive committee. “They felt like it was a betrayal,” said the recovery room and ICU nurse. “Everything is—I don’t want to say done under the table, but through the back door.”

“People felt strongly that if they needed to do it in such a way, then it wasn’t something that would really

benefit us,” added the recovery room nurse. She also objected to NYSNA’s demand that nurses ratify the tentative agreement. “You cannot tell me how to vote in a true democracy,” she said. “That alone made people want to vote against it because they knew that there was something missing.”

“It is better if all hospital workers are together because there is power in numbers,” said an endoscopy nurse. “The real problem is that there is a lot of corruption in the large corporations. They do not want to pay to provide safe healthcare because of capitalist greed.”

NewYork-Presbyterian management is renewing its efforts to break the strike. “They want nurses to go back inside, they’re luring them back inside, thinking that if a certain amount of nurses crosses the line, then everybody is going to be forced inside,” said the recovery room and ICU nurse. “But we haven’t been here for five weeks now for no reason. There had to be a reason. Why are we freezing here? Why are we standing here? Why are we not having insurance and not having a paycheck?”

“The hospital is inviting nurses to cross the picket line,” another nurse agreed, “but they would then be working without union protection, as well as working with the scab travel nurses.” When striking nurses returned to work at Mount Sinai Hospital, some travel nurses got them fired, she added. “They can do that by sabotaging them, assigning them unsustainable and unsafe assignments.”

The strike of 31,000 healthcare workers at Kaiser Permanente hospitals in California and Hawaii has given the striking New York nurses extra encouragement. “The show of solidarity that we’ve seen from them to us and vice versa, through the use of social media, has really been a source of strength for a lot of people,” said the recovery room nurse.

But the strikes in New York, California and Hawaii also are symptoms of the underlying problems that afflict the entire country’s healthcare system. “We are already way below the number of nurses needed in the United States,” said the recovery room and ICU nurse. “The young people who would like to become nurses are going to be turned off. The young nurses are going to be leaving the profession. The old nurses are going to seek different kinds of jobs that are going to pay their bills. I think the whole healthcare system is

literally crumbling down in front of our eyes.” Meanwhile, the hospitals and pharmaceutical companies are making billions of dollars, she added.

Defending the healthcare infrastructure and winning safe staffing will require a united struggle of all healthcare workers. The NewYork-Presbyterian nurses can take the first step by forming a rank-and-file committee that is independent of NYSNA, which is trying to sabotage the strike. This committee must lay out the nurses’ nonnegotiable demands and exercise control over negotiations.

The strike must not only continue but be expanded. Other healthcare workers at the hospital must join the nurses, and the rank-and-file committee must appeal to the nurses at all New York’s other hospitals to walk out in solidarity. This struggle must be united with the strike of the Kaiser Permanente workers and continue until all demands are met and all unjustly fired workers are reinstated.



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