

Southern California nurses should reject SEIU's effort to sabotage struggle for safe conditions

Evelyn Rios
22 December 2020

Hospital ICU capacities have been pushed past their limits in numerous counties throughout Southern California, including in Riverside and Los Angeles County, where 2,450 nurses and licensed health care professionals voted to strike beginning on Christmas Eve to demand adequate staffing levels, increased COVID-19 testing and other protections against the deadly disease.

Although 92 percent of the nurses voted to back a 10-day strike against the healthcare giant Hospital Corporation of America (HCA), their struggle is being sabotaged by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 121RN, which announced that it had reached an agreement with HCA over the weekend to avert the strike at the Riverside Community Hospital, West Hills Hospital and Medical Center and Los Robles Health System.

Even though the SEIU has not released the full contract, it is attempting to ram through the new three-year agreement during ratification votes scheduled for today and tomorrow. After reading the contract “highlights” released by the SEIU, nurses are saying the deal fails to address the life-and-death issues at three Southern California hospitals and will do nothing to stop HCA’s relentless drive to cut costs and boost profits, regardless of its impact on the lives of nurses and patients.

The scant details of the agreement included a surge pay program, across-the-board raises of 3.25 percent for years one and two, then three percent in year three, increased per diem rates, night shift and an on-call raise, along with a \$1,000 signing bonus. While 51 break relief positions were promised, there were no timetables for new hiring and absolutely nothing regarding patient care or ratios.

“A lot of us feel this is the bare minimum deal,” a nurse at Riverside Community Hospital told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “If we were only fighting for money then we would be demanding the 3.1 percent raise that was in the last contract we were supposed to get in September and never did.” The SEIU, she said, “pushed this contract through when the last contract was never fulfilled. We never received our last pay raise in September and this new contract is about 3 percent without retro pay. So not only are we getting paid less for more work;

they never fulfilled the hiring of new staff like they were supposed to.”

Referring to HCA management, she continued: “They are giving us more patients to care for without giving resources to help. There is no charge nurse, no resource nurse, no CNA or secretary to help answer phones or the call light. No one is watching our telemetry monitor for changes in heart rhythms or vitals. There is no one to help ‘run’ and stay clean to get supplies to us when we are gowned up in an isolation room. I literally told management I was drowning, and they didn’t care. They are allowing a change in documenting too. It’s so minimal and definitely unsafe to document vitals only once a shift.”

“The staffing issue dates back to 2017,” the Riverside nurse continued, “when they opened a new tower basically the size of a new hospital. Instead of hiring staff to fill this new building, they laid off staff and didn’t renew contract RNs. We were hundreds of nurses short because of this.”

The current conditions were worsened because of the mass layoffs of healthcare staff earlier in the year. “When COVID hit and they stopped doing elective procedures, they laid off even more nurses and didn’t plan to staff us even now 10 months later knowing flu season was coming.”

This is not due to any lack of resources. Healthcare Corporation of America (HCA) reported in October that it received \$6 billion in funding from the bipartisan CARES Act after reporting huge profits in the second quarter of 2020. *Forbes* reported that the stimulus turned into a windfall and that “HCA reported net income in the third quarter of more than \$2 billion on net revenues of \$13.3 billion.”

Nurses emphasized that their decision to strike on Christmas Eve was not taken lightly, but due to the gravest concern for their patients. Throughout Southern California, many regions report ICU capacities at or below zero percent, including Imperial, Inyo, Los Angeles, Mono, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Ventura counties.

Numerous field hospitals are being set up, ambulances snake outside emergency rooms, and there are reports of lobbies

being turned into makeshift care centers. Lack of staffing has forced many nurses and healthcare workers to work 12-and-a-half-hour shifts without lunch or bathroom breaks. Because of the overall lack of preparedness, nurses say patients who were not previously infected have contracted the disease at the hospital.

To make matters worse, the California Department of Public Health has allowed hospitals to break nurse-to-patient ratios, a dangerous move that significantly increases staff workload and stress as well as patient mortality. Instead of assistance or an organized lockdown to provide resources so that workers and their families can stay home and safe and out of the hospital system, Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom has ordered 63 refrigerator trucks and five thousand body bags.

The media and HCA management denounced the nurses' threat to strike, cynically claiming that these frontline workers were oblivious to the conditions of COVID-19 patients.

The SEIU has joined this gang-up with its attempt to push the contract before nurses have sufficient time to study and discuss it. As of midday December 21, staff had only received email notice that voting details were "TBD." The fact that SEIU officials have not given workers at least a week to study and discuss the contract means that they must be hiding even more concessions in the fine print. For this reason alone, nurses should reject the deal and prepare to conduct a genuine struggle.

Nurses should elect a rank-and-file strike committee to reach out to the broadest sections of the working class to prepare joint action. The most important thing that workers can do to support the nurses is to fight for the shutdown of all nonessential production and schools while providing full income to workers, so that the current surge of COVID-19 patients into the hospitals can be slowed.

But this means preparing a struggle against the Democratic Party-run state government in California, which is determined to keep unsafe workplaces and schools open so that workers can continue producing corporate profits, no matter how many succumb to the pandemic. The fight by nurses for increased staffing levels and adequate protection requires the development of a political general strike against the homicidal policies of the corporate and financial elite and both of their parties.

There is enormous support for such a struggle. Teachers, hotel workers, nurses, food production workers, and grocery workers are being devastated by the pandemic and want to fight to save their lives. In addition to the pandemic, workers are facing the worst economic conditions since the Great Depression, even as 650 billionaires in the US increased their wealth by \$1 trillion while more than 320,000 people perished.

Unite Here Local 11 has reported that 90 percent of its 30,000 members have lost their jobs in California and Arizona. By October, 20 percent of the hotel union members had tested positive for COVID-19. Kurt Petersen, co-president of Local 11

told the *Los Angeles Times* "he hears of a member dying every week." According to the California Nurses Association, more than 60,000 workers of its 150,000 members have contracted the virus and at least 230 have died.

The biggest obstacles to unified struggle are the trade unions themselves, which are tied by a million threads to the corporations and the government and fear that a strike by Southern California nurses would spark a far broader movement of the working class.

Workers want to fight, however. Addressing herself to the nurses at Riverside Community Hospital, West Hills Hospital and Medical Center and Los Robles Health System, a nurse in Long Beach said, "As a nurse who has been through the same experience with a California nurses union, I implore you not to accept this contract and strike for better working conditions for nurses, COVID-19 protections, and safe patient care.

"In 2019, the California nurses unions collaborated with the hospital leadership to sabotage strike efforts, would not allow nurses to review the contract language three days before voting on it because they wanted to keep the membership in the dark. Unions are not fighters of the working class, their agenda is to enrich themselves with membership dues, give those dues to the corrupt Democratic Party and their candidates, and stop workers from collectively organizing against the oligarchy."

The fight for rank-and-file safety committees must be connected to a political struggle for socialism, including the expropriation of the pandemic profiteers and the replacement of the for-profit medical system, which has proven to be a thorough failure, with a system of socialized medicine to guarantee high-quality care and decent working conditions and living standards for nurses and other health care workers.

For help starting a rank-and-file safety committee at your hospital and workplace, contact us at wsws.org/contact.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact