

Flurry of negotiations spells danger for New Brunswick, New Jersey nurse strike

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12 October 2023

The sudden flurry of negotiations between Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH) and the United Steelworkers (USW) suggests that the months-long strike of 1,700 nurses in New Brunswick, New Jersey, is in imminent danger of being betrayed.

After months of infrequent meetings, representatives of RWJUH and the USW recently held three negotiating sessions within one week. Another session is scheduled for Sunday. This burst of activity signals a renewed effort by both parties to end the strike quickly on the hospital's terms.

To prevent their hard-fought struggle from being defeated, the nurses must take control of their strike by forming a rank-and-file committee that is independent of the USW leadership. The nurses must break the impasse and end their isolation by expanding the strike to other RWJUH facilities and other sections of the working class.

On August 4, the nurses at RWJUH's New Brunswick campus walked out to demand increased staffing, safe nurse-to-patient ratios, better wages, a cap on healthcare costs and healthcare benefits in retirement. Although the economic demands are justified and necessary, the nurses have consistently emphasized the urgent need for safe staffing, without which appropriate patient care is impossible.

Nurses in the hospital's emergency rooms and intensive care units have sometimes been responsible for as many as nine patients each, nurse Louise Gurgui told News 12 New Jersey. For comparison, California law (which is poorly enforced) mandates nurse-to-patient ratios of 1:4 in the emergency department and 1:2 in the intensive care unit. A shockingly high 1:9 ratio would increase the risk of potentially fatal errors and adverse events.

"It's too frustrating not to be able to give the care

that we really want to give to our patients," a medical-surgical nurse told the *World Socialist Web Site* on condition of anonymity. "If a nurse is drowning, how can we help our patients?" she asked.

The strike at RWJUH takes place amid an expanding rebellion of healthcare workers. Last week, 75,000 healthcare workers at Kaiser Permanente waged a strike that the trade unions limited to three days. Pharmacists, technicians and support staff at Walgreens stores across the country struck for three days this week to protest poor working conditions. On Tuesday, nurses at Virginia Mason Medical Center in Seattle picketed to fight for better staffing and protection from workplace violence. And more than 1,300 healthcare workers voted to authorize a strike at two PeaceHealth hospitals in Washington.

"Everyone is having these strikes," said the medical-surgical nurse, who expressed support for the workers at Kaiser Permanente. "The main problem is that the CEOs are earning lots of money while the workers are struggling every day. If everyone went on strike, they'd have a hard time finding nurses."

From the beginning of the New Brunswick strike, the administration of RWJUH has played hardball. To date, it has spent \$76.2 million on travel nurses to keep the facility running. In a recent statement, hospital spokesperson Wendy Gottsegen has claimed that the nurses want "more than any health care organization would ever agree to" and are advancing "untenable outlier positions."

In addition, RWJUH persuaded a superior court judge to issue a temporary restraining order against the striking nurses. The order forbids the workers to block entrances and disrupt traffic. For now, the order also has prevented the nurses from playing music and limited the size of the groups in which they can gather.

A hospital security guard was filmed pushing one of the nurses, even as the hospital blames the nurses for being hostile.

Last month, the hospital issued an ultimatum to the nurses: either accept the last offer that the hospital made before the strike began or return to work and agree to binding arbitration. By a vote of about 90 percent, the nurses courageously rejected both options and vowed to continue their strike. This result is exceptionally significant considering the length of the strike and the fact that the hospital has cruelly cut off the nurses' health insurance. The vote underscores the nurses' determination to win the staffing and ratios that they need to maintain reasonable workloads and provide the highest quality care.

In contrast with the hospital's ruthlessness, the USW has shown complete passivity. Instead of striking real blows against management, the union has kept them isolated so that they can be worn down and defeated. Although the union has \$1.1 billion in net assets, it is not paying the nurses strike pay.

For the past two-and-a-half months, the nurses have had to find second jobs, file for unemployment or rely on donations to make ends meet. The lack of strike pay is not an oversight, but an attempt to starve workers into submission.

Nor has the USW made any attempt to strengthen the nurses' position by broadening the strike. In addition to its New Brunswick Facility, RWJUH also has campuses in Somerville and Rahway. But the USW has not appealed to the nurses at these hospitals—or to any other healthcare workers—to join the strike. Meanwhile, Judy Danella, president of USW Local 4–200, has been trying to persuade the techs and pharmacists in New Brunswick to join the union, according to an anonymous nurse. Danella's immediate concern is not to win the strike but to gain more dues-paying members for the local.

Instead of expanding the fight, the USW has held various rallies and protests that the RWJUH administration has ignored. Recently, the USW sent the nurses to the Newark campus of Rutgers University to demand that Mark Manigan, CEO of RWJBarnabas Health, be removed from the university's board of governors. In the unlikely event that the board granted this demand, it would have no effect on conditions at RWJUH.

The USW has also diverted the nurses' energy into futile appeals to Democratic politicians such as New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy. Though Murphy claims to be pro-labor, he intervened in the first-ever faculty strike at Rutgers in April to impose contracts on the workers that did not meet their fundamental demands. At the national level, the Democratic Party has tried to suppress the growing strike movement using both the support of the corrupt union bureaucrats and anti-strike laws.

The nurses at RWJUH in New Brunswick have shown admirable courage for 10 long weeks. But the hospital and the USW are conspiring to end the strike and impose concessions, and nurses must not allow their struggle to be defeated. The only way to break the impasse is to expand the strike. To do this, the nurses must take control into their own hands and form a rank-and-file committee that is independent of the USW leadership and of both capitalist parties.

The urgent task for RWJUH nurses is to appeal to workers at the other two RWJUH campuses and to healthcare workers at Kaiser Permanente and elsewhere. Healthcare workers everywhere are rebelling against the same attacks, which are rooted in the system of for-profit medicine. These struggles must be united in a fight to replace capitalism with socialism, which will provide healthcare to all as a basic right.



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