

# Bernie Sanders holds sham hearing to cover USW betrayal of striking New Jersey nurses

Erik Schreiber  
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Last week, Senator Bernie Sanders held a field hearing of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. The official topic of the hearing was the staffing crisis in US hospitals, but the real agenda of Sanders was to feign support for the striking nurses at nearby Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH) in order to bolster the credibility of the United Steelworkers (USW), which (mis) represents the nurses. In turn, the union officials who testified used the hearing to sow illusions that the nurses can rely on Democratic Party politicians to enact reforms.

About 1,700 nurses at RWJUH have been conducting a determined strike since August 4. The nurses are fighting for better pay, a cap on health insurance costs and health benefits in retirement. But the nurses consistently stress that their most important goal is to win better staffing and safe nurse-to-patient ratios.

The USW is not providing the nurses strike pay, and RWJUH cut off the nurses' health insurance on Labor Day weekend. Despite these economic attacks, the nurses voted in September by nearly 90 percent to continue the strike. The vote underscores not only the dire need for improved staffing at the hospital, but also the nurses' exceptional courage and tenacity.

Julia, an experienced nurse at RWJUH, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the situation at the hospital. Her name has been changed to protect her identity. "We can't sustain what [nurses] have been doing all over the country," she said. "You just have to throw meds at people. You don't have time to look at the whole picture, to read the chart, to read the notes, to really figure out what someone needs."

A shortage of nurses is not the only problem. "They take away our ancillary staff, too," said Julia. "I can't

be a social worker and a nurse's aide while I'm trying to talk to a family about their dying family member."

Julia said that she and her coworkers are "fighting for the future of healthcare." Unsafe conditions and significantly decreased retention rates are increasing nurses' responsibilities to dangerous levels. "We have new nurses being pushed to be charge [nurses] after a year and precepting people. It's not appropriate. They can't sustain the number of patients, so they are leaving the bedside. If we had enforceable ratios, people would stay."

Although these issues were raised during the Senate hearing in New Brunswick, no genuine solutions were proposed. As usual, union leaders advocated new laws to mandate safe nurse-to-patient ratios, citing legislation enacted in California. Such legislation has been introduced in New Jersey's Senate each year for the past 20 years, only to die in committee. Moreover, nurses in California know that these laws are rarely enforced, and that hospitals generally flout them with impunity.

The entire hearing had a theatrical character. When Sanders appeared on the stage, the crowd broke into applause. Tellingly, no other member of the Senate HELP Committee attended the hearing. Empty chairs and name tags had been placed to emphasize the absence of Alan Lee, president of RWJUH, and Mark Manigan, president and CEO of RWJBarnabas Health, which owns the hospital. Both executives declined invitations to attend.

Sanders seized the opportunity for grandstanding. "I would have asked them how their health care system could afford to spend over \$100 million on traveling nurses ... but somehow cannot afford to mandate safe staffing ratios to improve the lives of patients and nurses at the hospital," he said, referring to Lee and

Manigan. “I was also very curious to know how this nonprofit hospital could find some \$17 million in CEO compensation for one person in 2021.”

These remarks are so much sand in workers’ eyes. In reality, Sanders supports wealthy CEOs, as his intervention in the railroad workers’ struggle last year demonstrated. Sanders consented to an expedited procedure that guaranteed the swift passage of a law banning a railroad strike and imposing a pro-company contract on the workers. At the same time he used a procedural maneuver in order to provide himself and other “progressives” a cover for their betrayal.

One of the witnesses who Sanders invited to testify was Debbie White, president of Health Professionals and Allied Employees (HPAE), which is New Jersey’s largest nurses’ union. About 1,200 HPAE members work at Jersey Shore University Medical Center (JSUMC). Last year, more than half of the JSUMC nurses reported that they wouldn’t feel safe being treated at the facility where they work.

White herself has allowed the hospital to maintain the unsafe conditions in healthcare. She prevented the JSUMC nurses from striking in 2020, limiting their actions to brief informational pickets. She also divided the workers from nurses at Southern Ocean Medical Center who were also without a contract. Both hospitals are owned by the same company: Hackensack Meridian Health. White’s divide-and-conquer tactic enabled the company to enforce its interests and deny the nurses their basic demands, such as an adequate supply of personal protective equipment.

The panel also included Nancy Hagans, president of National Nurses United (NNU) and the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA). NNU collaborates closely with the Democratic Party, which is fully supporting the Israeli government as it bombs hospitals in Gaza. As president of NYSNA, Hagans betrayed more than 17,000 healthcare workers who had voted overwhelmingly to strike at 12 New York hospitals. Rather than overseeing a united struggle, she divided the nurses by hospital and prevented strikes at all but two facilities. In this way, Hagans imposed contracts that, among other things, institutionalize understaffing by allowing management to pay derisory fines.

Judy Danella, president of USW Local 4-200, completed this rogues’ gallery. Instead of providing strike pay to the RWJUH nurses, she has overseen the

distribution of gift cards. Emergency assistance is available to the nurses, but “you have to show you need it,” said Danella. She herself received a salary of about \$160,000 from the USW last year. Although RWJUH has two campuses besides the facility in New Brunswick, Danella has not called the nurses at those locations to join the strike. Instead, she has encouraged fruitless appeals to the Democrats and organized stunts such as a rally outside Manigan’s home.

Like that rally, the sham Senate hearing did not bring the RWJUH nurses any closer to winning their demands. These workers have been isolated for nearly three months, and their strike must be expanded if it is to succeed. Yet neither Danella, White nor Hagans called for other nurses to join the RWJUH strike. The USW is attempting to starve the nurses into submission and impose a contract acceptable to hospital management.

To prevent such a betrayal, the RWJUH nurses must take the initiative away from the USW bureaucrats. The urgent task is to form a rank-and-file committee that workers themselves control. This committee must reach out not to the Democrats or Republicans, but to other nurses and healthcare workers for support. All healthcare workers, as well as workers in other industries, are facing similar attacks on their livelihoods as the ruling class seeks ever more money for war in Ukraine, the Middle East and China. The RWJUH workers will find ready allies and strengthen their hand enormously by taking control of their own struggle.



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