

Nurses at three New Jersey hospitals poised to strike over staffing ratios

Erik Schreiber
31 May 2024

About 3,000 nurses at three hospitals in New Jersey could soon begin a strike for safe staffing. Contracts expired Friday for 1,500 nurses at Cooper University Health Care in Camden, 800 nurses at Englewood Health in Englewood and 750 nurses at Palisades Medical Center (part of Hackensack Meridian Health) in North Bergen. As of this writing, Health Professionals and Allied Employees (HPAE), the union to which the nurses belong, has not given the hospitals 10 days' notice that a strike will begin.

The nurses' main demand is that safe nurse-to-patient ratios be included in their new contracts. More than 90 percent of the nurses at each hospital voted to authorize the strike, which signifies the magnitude of the problem and the workers' determination to fight.

The developments in New Jersey continue a series of near-unanimous strike votes among US healthcare workers. Inadequate staffing, a long-standing problem that has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has been the main factor motivating workers' struggles. Understaffing increases nurses' workloads, heightens the risk of medical errors, reduces the quality of patient care and contributes to overwork and burnout.

Recent years have seen a wave of early retirements among nurses, as well as an increase in nurses leaving the profession entirely. In New Jersey, nearly one-third of nurses have left bedside care in the past several years, according to HPAE. At least seven of 10 currently employed nurses are considering retirement. Only about half of New Jersey's 147,000 licensed nurses are working, according to the union.

The contracts at Cooper University Health Care, Englewood Health and Palisades Medical Center are the first healthcare worker contracts to expire in New Jersey since last year's strike at Robert Wood Johnson

University Hospital (RWJUH) in New Brunswick. Debbie White, president of HPAE, said at a recent news conference that the agreement with RWJUH would serve as a model during the current negotiations. This statement is a clear warning that HPAE plans to betray the 3,000 nurses who are poised to strike.

For more than four months, the RWJUH nurses fought bravely for safe staffing and enforceable nurse-to-patient ratios. Finally, the United Steelworkers (USW) presented them with an agreement that established ratios but allowed the hospital to maintain understaffing of 18.5 percent without being penalized. It placed the onus on the already overburdened nurses to fill out safe staffing forms when understaffing exceeded the allowed level. If these criteria were met, then the contract provided for nurses to receive only two or three hours' additional pay, even if the understaffed shift was 12 or 16 hours long. Under increasing financial pressure, and believing that the USW would not negotiate better terms, the RWJUH nurses ratified the inadequate agreement. "This was not the contract that we wanted," one of them told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Imposing a similar defeat on the 3,000 nurses who are ready to strike would be consistent with HPAE's record of betrayals. In 2020, White prevented a strike of about 1,200 workers at Jersey Shore University Medical Center (JSUMC) in Neptune. The union also kept these workers divided from those at Southern Ocean Medical Center in Manahawkin, who were also without a contract. Both facilities are owned by Hackensack Meridian Health. HPAE's opposition to a united fight enabled the company to impose its demands at nurses' expense. One result is that in 2022, most nurses at JSUMC reported that they wouldn't feel safe being treated at their workplace.

Instead of waging united struggles, HPAE encourages its members to appeal to Democratic politicians. Like the USW, HPAE is advocating for state legislation that would mandate staffing ratios. It has held rallies in Trenton, New Jersey's capital, to demand passage of this reform. But such legislation has been introduced in New Jersey's Senate each year for the past 20 years, only to die in committee. In California, Oregon and Massachusetts, where safe staffing laws have been passed, healthcare systems flout them with impunity.

HPAE knows very well that nurses' pleas will fall on deaf ears. But because of its intimate relationship with the Democratic Party, it encourages illusions that the latter will respond to workers' needs. The Democrats' priority is not providing workplace reforms, but continuing the genocide that Israel is committing in Gaza and the proxy war with Russia that is being fought in Ukraine. As the world's oldest capitalist party and a trusted agent of Wall Street, the Democratic Party is a party of imperialist war, which is paid for by attacks on the working class at home.

The HPAE's affiliation with the Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals, which is the healthcare division of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), makes its integration into the Democratic Party unmistakable. Like President Joe Biden and other Democrats, AFT President Randi Weingarten has smeared students protesting the genocide as antisemitic. But Weingarten had no qualms about traveling to Ukraine in 2022 and shaking hands with genuine antisemites such as Andriy Sadovyi, the mayor of Lviv and an open admirer of Stepan Bandera, who collaborated with the Nazis during World War II. The Democrats rely heavily on Weingarten to suppress opposition within the working class and promote nationalism and war.

White's recent comments and the history of the HPAE make clear that the union is preparing to betray the 3,000 nurses at Cooper University Health Care, Englewood Health and Palisades Medical Center. They also reveal that these nurses face not only a workplace struggle, but also, and more fundamentally, a political struggle. To wage a determined and effective fight for safe staffing, the nurses will need to establish their political and organizational independence. This will require them to organize rank-and-file committees that they, not the HPAE leadership, control democratically.

These committees must also be independent of both capitalist parties.

Rank-and-file committees will enable the nurses to elaborate a winning strategy to fight for their demands. The nurses' power will be strengthened if they appeal to other healthcare workers, and workers in other industries, for support. A strike at the three New Jersey hospitals must become part of a campaign to remove the profit motive from healthcare and to establish a socialist system that provides the highest quality healthcare to all as a basic right.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)