

California nurses at large pediatrics hospital sent back to work after two-day strike

Our reporters
23 July 2024

Rady nurses, contact the WSWs today for assistance in building a Rank-and-File committee.

Around 1,600 nurses at Rady Children’s Hospital in San Diego, California returned to work Wednesday after a two-day strike over inadequate pay and benefits. The strike is the first in the union’s history since the United Nurses of Children’s Hospital (UNOCH) Local 1699, an affiliate of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, was created 20 years ago.

Rady Children’s is the fifth-largest children’s hospital in the country and the largest on the West Coast. As the region’s only Level I pediatric trauma center, the hospital has been at the forefront of crises in healthcare which include chronic and severe understaffing and emergency room crowding.

Healthcare workers have contended with continued waves of COVID-19, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), rhinovirus, enterovirus, adenovirus, and the flu. The situation has become worse as the government has dropped all tracking, testing, and tracing of COVID-19, as well as mitigation measures such as high-quality filtration systems in public facilities.

Rady nurses cite skyrocketing inflation and costs of living, which have resulted in what amount to pay cuts as wages have not kept pace. Their wages are also well below other healthcare providers in the region.

A nurse on the picket line told the WSWs, “It’s mainly about fair pay. We have nurses who can’t afford to take their kids to their own hospital, nurses working two to three jobs.” Another added, “We get paid 34 percent less than other doctors and many nurses can’t afford to send their kids to our own hospital because of pay and lack of benefits.”

On Sunday, UNOCH turned down a last-minute deal offered by the hospital which would have increased the base pay offer by a mere 1 percent, from 8 to 9 percent,

in the first year of the contract, with 4 percent increases for the next two years.

The nurses have been working under an expired contract since June 30. Despite nurses’ determination, UNOCH Local 1699 has limited the strike to two days and is sending its members back without a contract. One nurse on the picket line told WSWs reporters, “I have long understood the shady business going on with the union. They aren’t really representing the nurses here.”

WSWS reporters raised the need for unity with healthcare workers in Australia and internationally and handed out copies of a statement issued by a group of Australian doctors victimized for their opposition to the genocide in Gaza. A recent report in *The Lancet* found the death toll is far higher than estimated and close to 186,000.

One nurse said in response to the explanation of the unions and the call for international unity, “I’m glad someone is saying it out loud.” Another added: “How about an international strike!”

Just nine months ago a limited strike by 75,000 workers at Kaiser Permanente, the largest in US history, took place. The Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions (CKPU) pushed through an agreement that workers were not allowed to study before voting, that had no concrete staffing requirements, and poor wage increases that would only reach \$25 an hour in California by 2026.

A dozen Democratic Party politicians, including California federal representatives Katie Porter, Ted Lieu and Ro Khanna, flooded the picket lines to posture as “friends” of workers.” In fact, all of them voted in 2022 to pre-emptively ban a strike by railroad workers.

On Tuesday, UNOCH allowed Democratic Party Senator Toni Atkins to speak on the picket line. Atkins

is running to replace Governor Gavin Newsom in 2026. While rolling out the red carpet for Democrats, union bureaucrats attempted to prevent WSWs reporters from speaking with nurses.

The Democratic Party has been at the forefront of domestic attacks on wages, social services and hospitals. Just this past month Newsom further pushed off a minimum wage bill for healthcare workers that was initially supposed to start in January. He had previously worked with the Service Employees International Union-United Healthcare Workers West (SEIU-UHW) to implement a “trigger” that would tie the wage increase to the state budget.

The bill, signed the same day the Kaiser strike ended, was touted by the unions as being the solution to the staffing crisis in healthcare.

While the majority of the union bureaucracy continues their alliance with Democrats, Teamsters General President Sean O’Brien spoke at the Republican National Convention. While he stopped short of formally endorsing Trump, he gave an ultra-nationalist speech in which he denounced corporations for “disloyalty” and declared that “It needs to be easier for companies to remain in America”—in other words, through deeper cuts.

The time to stand up to the assault on healthcare and hospitals is now. This is a fight against the two capitalist parties as well as their supporters in the union bureaucracy. Nurses must join the growing global movement of rank-and-file committees to prepare for a fight against both the bureaucracy and management.

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