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USA

Thousands of Nurses Struck New York Hospitals for Patient Care and Won

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Seven thousand nurses struck two of New York City's largest private hospitals, Montefiore and Mt. Sinai on January 9. Saying that they were "exhausted and burnt out" because of staffing shortages, and with their contract expired on December 31, the nurses maintained huge, spirited picket lines in front of the hospitals carrying signs that read, "On Strike for Better Patient Care." And after three days, they won. Nancy Hagans, president of the New York State Nurses Association, said her union had won a "historic victory."

Michelle Gonzalez, an ICU nurse at Montefiore Hospital said, "The strike was about our patients. Nurses and health care workers in general are working in really terrible conditions. We have too many patients who need to be seen or too many patients who are very, very sick assigned to us. That's why we had to make this decision to go on strike."

Nurses had three goals in the strike, all aimed at maintaining a stable and adequate nursing staff to protect patients' health. First, establishing staffing levels. Second, establishing a conduit from nursing schools to hospitals to attract nurses. Third, adequate salaries to keep nurses. At the two hospitals that struck, they won all three.

At ten major New York City private hospitals nurses gave notice they would strike on January 9, though the union leadership hoped to avoid a strike, and discouraged nurses from walking out. With the union leadership pressing for a settlement, nurses at eight hospitals voted to sign contracts, but nurses at Montefiore and Mt. Sinai refused and struck for patient care staffing ratios that could be enforced, and they were successful. Under the agreement reached at those two hospitals, the hospital corporation will be penalized if it fails to maintain staffing levels. If management fails to provide enough nurses, the salary that would have been paid to the missing nurses will be divided among the other nurses and paid within two months, while patients will receive a 15% discount. This is a novel and historic measure.

"This has been a phenomenal victory for us as nurses," said Gonzalez. "When we went out to the streets, it felt like we were telling the hospital CEOs, that we are not going to continue working under these conditions. We're going to continue to fight for better for ourselves and for our patients."

Not only did the nurses win enforceable minimum staffing levels, they also won wage increases of 19.2%. In addition, hospitals agreed to fill vacancies; provide fully funded healthcare and lifetime health coverage for retirees, offer educational benefits, and increase pension funds payments.

Today health care is, after education, the second largest industry. There are 22 million health care workers, 14% of all workers, seven million hospital workers, and two million of them are registered nurses. Unlike many other jobs and professions, nurses are 85% female and tend to reflect the ethnic diversity of the country, with white, Black, Latina, and Asian nurses working and when necessary, striking together.

Unions represent 20 percent of all nurses and recently many have struck hospitals around the country. Over the last three years of the COVID pandemic hundreds of nurses lost their lives and burnout drove thousands to leave the profession. Last year alone, six unions representing 32,000 struck at various hospitals across the United States. They have done so with great sympathy from the public, which has viewed the nurses as heroic.

In the 1970s, a time of labor upheaval, socialist groups sent their members into heavy industry—steel, auto, mining and trucking—but today the priorities are different. A leftist group called the Rank-and-File Project is recruiting leftists

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to become teachers and nurses, as well as warehouse workers and UPS drivers. Their goal is to organize rank-and-file workers and to strengthen the labor movement while recruiting workers to socialism.

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