

San Diego nurses work without contract after union blocks Sharp Healthcare strike

By Marko Leone
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Sharp Healthcare nurses in San Diego, California are continuing to work without a contract after the United Nurses Association of California (UNAC) union called off a limited, three-day strike last weekend, less than 24 hours before it was set to begin Monday. The union ordered more than 3,000 nurses to report to their normally scheduled shifts.

The decision to call off the strike came after the UNAC and Sharp reached an agreement related to union dues of newly hired nurses. New nurses will be required to pay union dues within 30 days of employment, or face termination. This is a key demand of the union as it seeks to shore up its income stream. In a slap in the face to nurses, the union also agreed that it would not submit another strike notice before January 1.

Sharp had responded to the strike threat by saying it would train 1,000 replacement workers and reschedule surgeries and other procedures. Under state law, replacement workers would be kept on the job for five days.

The union and the company will now resume negotiations behind closed doors. Nurses are seeking better wages and working conditions. For its part the UNAC has called for a 20 percent pay increase in the first year of a three-year contract followed by 12 percent in subsequent years.

According to the union, Sharp nurses are underpaid in comparison to other nurses in the area by as much as \$8-\$16 an hour. Nurses complain of understaffing and overwork, often being denied breaks and meals.

In November, 98 percent of the nurses voted overwhelmingly to oppose Sharp's "last, best, and final offer," after the union and Sharp management had negotiated for months. The UNAC announced the three-day strike to let the workers let off steam while

continuing to isolate the nurses.

The union hailed the calling off of the strike, presenting it as a victory. However the sudden decision, taken without any resolution of the basic issues, left nurses angry and confused.

It is a common practice, particularly in California, for the unions to call limited or partial strikes in order to disperse workers' anger while having minimal impact on management operations. Generally the job actions are wound up without securing any of the workers' demands.

Union spokesman Jeff Rogers stated, "There has been significant movement on some of the important issues. But there's more to be done about the major issue, which is the recruitment and retention of well-trained and experienced nurses." He made no mention of the commitment shown by the overwhelming 98 percent vote on the part of over 2,200 nurses to go on strike over low pay and understaffing. The nurses turned down a management offer of a base pay hike of 16 to 26 percent over a three-year period.

The struggle by Sharp nurses in San Diego takes place under conditions of mounting attacks and threats against healthcare statewide and nationally. In California billions of dollars have been cut from healthcare by both Democrats and Republicans. The incoming Trump administration, meanwhile, is targeting Medicare.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to several Sharp workers following the calling off of the strike.

Jeff, a surgical technician, said, "The strike is about how a big company like Sharp is thinking of themselves instead of the employees. They spend money on TV ads every day to get new customers, they just bought new palm trees and Hummer golf carts. They are spending money on these things instead of

paying nurses and staff.”

Jeff said that he was on the bottom half of the pay scale in San Diego as a surgical technician. When asked about the election and his thoughts on the bipartisan attack on health care, he responded, “I initially thought Clinton was a better option than Trump,” but then added he felt Clinton could not be trusted.

When asked his view on the way forward he responded, “The nurses should have gone through with the strike. Apparently now Sharp is agreeing with the union getting dues from new employees, but they are not budging with the pay scale. The union now looks weak, and Sharp is able to get what it wants.”

Kitchen workers told reporters that surgical technicians were not getting a bonus or a raise until the issues were settled with the nurses.

Three Sterile Processing Technicians (SPTs), who requested that their names not be published, spoke about the issues facing health care workers. In their position, only the full-time workers receive health insurance, of which they must pay part. The part-time or contracted workers do not receive health benefits.

One SPT remarked about Obamacare, “The only people who benefited at all are those who don't work, the very poor. Anyone who works full time and is poor has to pay for the health plan or pay the fine to the government. We were better off being able to go to Tijuana (Mexico) to receive our health care because it is so expensive here.”

She went on, “Obama didn't do anything, I don't know why people voted for him. Trump and Clinton are both the same, Trump is more blunt, but Hilary is a hypocrite.”

Another SPT said, “The election was a joke, Trump is a joke. I didn't like either of the candidates. Trump is a clown, and Clinton is a criminal—I wanted Bernie Sanders to win.” WSWS reporters explained that the function of the Sanders campaign was to keep the anger of workers over attacks on jobs, wages and endless wars trapped within the confines of the big business Democratic Party.

Carol, a telemetry technician, has been working in the medical field since 1984. Although the technologists were not going to strike, she showed up outside the Sharp hospital in Kearny Mesa to support her coworkers.

She said, “I didn't hear that the strike got cancelled. I came out here to support our nurses, and I agree that we need to all fight together—nurses, technicians, administrative staff, doctors and housekeepers. We are all part of a team, we work together. There shouldn't just be a nurses' strike. We are all facing the same problems—we are understaffed and underpaid compared to our counterparts at other hospitals. We are some of the lowest paid here at Sharp. We want better pay and pensions.”

“The executives here are raking in millions. There was a story in the paper that our CEO made \$1.7 million. This is outrageous while the hospital staff and housekeepers aren't making enough to get by, and they have kids!”

Denise, a hospital worker who requested that her job title not be named, remarked that she had not even heard of the strike cancellation. She heard murmurs through coworkers about a potential strike a few weeks back, but was given little to no information about it.

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