

Tufts Medical Center lockout to end with no gains for nurses

By John Marion
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The punitive lockout of more than 1,200 nurses by the Tufts Medical Center in Boston continued through the weekend. The nurses, who are not being paid during the lockout and receive no strike pay from the Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA), are carrying on a struggle for better staffing, better pay, and in defense of a defined benefit pension plan which the hospital is trying to take away from nurses who have worked for decades.

The nurses are scheduled to return to work on Monday morning, but will still be without a contract. The union's "strategy" of working with local Democrats to pressure management to return to the negotiating table has produced nothing. Instead nurses will return to work with none of their demands achieved.

WSWS reporters spoke with picketing nurses on Saturday afternoon. While Tufts Medical Center and other Massachusetts hospitals are incorporated as "not-for-profits," nurses face the same issues of wage inequality as tens of millions of other workers. Dr. Michael Wagner, the CEO of the hospital, makes more than \$1 million per year and received a pay raise of 70 percent after taking the CEO job. Terry Hudson Jinks, the Chief Nursing Officer, makes approximately \$500,000.

In contrast, nurses at the top of their pay grades have not had raises in six years while the amount they pay for their own benefits keeps increasing. The nurses chanted, "Nurses over profits, shame on Tufts," while picketing on Saturday afternoon.

The low wages at the Tufts Medical Center have led to a pattern in which young nurses work there for a couple of years to gain experience and then move on to better-paying hospitals. The Partners Health system—which several other Boston area hospitals

belong to—is much larger than the Tufts' Wellforce system. Partners is able to negotiate better reimbursement rates with insurance companies in a market which puts revenues above all else.

The flow of young nurses to better-paying hospitals has contributed to staffing levels at Tufts that are in violation of Massachusetts law. While in 2012 the medical center had seven nurses for every 10 critical care patients, by 2015 the ratio had dwindled to four or five nurses for every 10 patients. Nurses are having to work 16-hour days and being called in to cover shifts with only a few hours of notice.

Florence, a recovery room nurse, said that "because there is such lean staffing, if there's one ill call then we cannot run the unit the way it needs to be run so they send out texts saying, 'Anyone please come in here.' If not, we're mandated to stay to 16 hours."

A group of neo-natal Intensive Care Unit nurses, who wished to remain anonymous, told our reporters that Tufts Medical Center is "overstaffing with the scab nurses but when we go in on Monday morning we're not going have that same volume of nurses."

Nearly 350 of the nurses, many of whom have worked at the Tufts Medical Center for 30 years or more, stand to lose their defined benefit pension plan if management's demands are imposed. Management is seeking to replace the plan with a defined-contribution 403(b) pension that would subject nurses' retirement savings to the vagaries of the stock market.

When asked about the defined-benefit plan, the neo-natal ICU nurses said, "We feel like at the end of your career you're going to be able to live comfortably, and now they want to take that all away."

The nurses' union has offered to accept a multi-employer defined benefit plan, which management has flatly refused.

The lockout was imposed by management as punishment for a one-day strike called by the nurses' union last Wednesday. When WSWS reporters pointed out that one-day strikes are a common union tactic for letting off steam without advancing workers' struggles, Florence responded, "I think that the one-day strike is a temporary fix, and I think that maybe it needs to be longer."

Management and the MNA have not negotiated a complete contract for the nurses in seven years. Instead, they have extended the existing language as needed, with small yearly raises of around 2 percent, barely keeping up with inflation.

While the nurses struggle, the MNA is working hand-in-hand with the Democratic Party. On Saturday morning, Democratic politicians, including Boston Mayor Marty Walsh and US Representatives Michael Capuano and Stephen Lynch, attended a rally of the locked out nurses.

Walsh, a former head of the Boston Building Trades Council, could promise the nurses nothing more than: "I'm asking for it to end ... I'm asking the hospital now to come back to the bargaining table."

The Democrats have spearheaded the assault on health care, shifting costs from employers to workers and encouraging cost-cutting by hospitals. This will only worsen under the Trump administration and the bipartisan health care plan being worked out in Washington.

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