

NYC nurses in historic strike: From 'heroes' to 'disposable' in the eyes of hospital profiteers

written by Sharon Black

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Nurses picket line at New York-Presbyterian in Washington Heights,

Manhattan.

New York, Jan. 13 — Do you remember when New York City nurses were heroes? When they showed up every day at the height of the pandemic, risking their lives to save thousands from a deadly and highly contagious virus?

The city clapped and banged pots at 7 p.m. for them. Politicians called them angels. Their courage was the thin white line between life and death for a city in crisis.

Hospital executives claw back pandemic-era gains

But the executives at New York's largest and richest private hospital networks — Mount Sinai, New York-Presbyterian, and Montefiore — have short memories. In the cold dawn of the new year, they have chosen not to honor that sacrifice, but to betray it.

Now in its second day, more than 15,000 nurses from these three corporate health care giants walked out, forming the largest nurse strike in New York City history. Their red NYSNA (New York State Nurses Association) shirts flooded the picket lines, a river of justified anger outside institutions dripping in billions of dollars in endowments and revenue.

This is not a strike for new gains. This is a defensive battle, a necessary uprising to stop hospital executives from clawing back the historic protections nurses won just three years ago.

In 2023, leveraging the moral authority they earned during COVID, nurses struck and secured a landmark contract with, for the first time, enforceable safe-staffing ratios. That contract expired on Dec. 31, 2024. Now, management has returned to the table with red pens, seeking to slash and burn what nurses risked everything to

achieve.

The nurses' union has contended that the assault is twofold: an attack on patient safety and an attack on the nurses' own well-being.

The hard-won staffing ratios are on the chopping block, a move that would directly endanger patients and burn out nurses. Simultaneously, the hospitals are gutting health care benefits. At Mount Sinai, the contract with Anthem insurance also expired on Dec. 31, leaving nurses in the grotesque position of being unable to afford care at the very hospitals they serve.

The hospitals' response has been a lesson in capitalist brutality. Rather than negotiate in good faith, they have chosen to spend obscene amounts of money — up to \$10,000 a week per nurse — on temporary "travel nurses" to break the strike.

Nurses on the picket line have continued to exclaim that it is not safe and that replacement nurses are not properly trained. The striking nurses know this better than anyone; it was their job to train these underqualified replacements. As flu season peaks, this scab solution, paid for at a premium, constitutes a deliberate public health hazard orchestrated by management.

Profits over patients: why this strike matters

This struggle reverberates far beyond the picket lines at these three networks. The contract settled here will set the pattern for 6,000 additional NYSNA nurses at the city's 11 public hospitals. This is a fight for the soul of health care in New York.

The pandemic revealed that our health care system is not broken — it is working exactly as designed by the profiteers who run it. It is a system that exalts caregivers as heroes in a crisis, then treats them as disposable costs in a spreadsheet when the crisis ebbs. It is a system where executives would rather pay a premium for scabs than guarantee safe staffing and decent care for the workers who form its

foundation.

The nurses, in their brilliant red shirts, are drawing a line. They are reminding us that the heroism of 2020 was not a passive act of suffering, but an active, collective power. That power, forged in the ICU, is now being exercised on the street.

They are fighting for patients, for safe care, for their own lives, and for the principle that those who do the most essential work deserve security and respect. Their strike is a necessary intervention to cure the disease of greed infecting our hospitals. Solidarity with the nurses is a prescription for a healthier city for us all.

Sharon Black is a retired nurse who worked in Manhattan and Baltimore.



Organizers with Baltimore's People's Power Assembly and the Harriet Tubman Center of Los Angeles join the nurses picket line in New York. SLL photo

