Barring any unlikely developments, 1,800 nurses and clinicians across 3 Providence bargaining units will begin our strike on Monday at 0530. This is in spite of our best efforts and countless hours at the bargaining table to reach a reasonable agreement which appreciated our needs and concerns.

Make no mistake, our collective power and our upcoming strike has already had a tremendous impact, resulting in tens of millions of dollars in unanticipated expenses and tens of millions more in lost revenue. We take no pleasure in that, and we truly did what we could to avoid it. We grieve for its impact on our patients and our community. We also believe it could have taken much less than what's already been spent to reach a fair agreement, and we believe the compensation in our contract is one of the best investments Providence can make. We hope they see that one day.

Many of you have asked why. We have also asked ourselves how it has come to this. Here is what we think.

The most dangerous thing to Providence executives is our belief that if we stick together, support one another, and stand up for what's right then we can change things for the better. What makes that belief so dangerous is that once nurses know that, CNAs, techs, professionals, and providers might figure that out also. Once workers know that, maybe patients will catch on too.

Our union has changed in recent years. We are the 4th, 5th, and 6th Providence bargaining units to authorize a strike in the last 14 months. In addition to organizing to demand more at the bargaining table, we have organized to include Professionals in the Home Health & Hospice bargaining unit, Nurses and Providers at the Providence Women’s Clinics have voted to form a union, ED Doctors in Medford have voted to form a union, and last week 81 Hospitalists at Providence St. Vincent filed for a union election. Healthcare workers are on the march, and we expect we are just getting started.

Providence is still a largely non-union healthcare system, and they appear to desperately want to keep it that way. If people start believing in themselves, if people start winning things, if
people start demanding accountability from the top executives, they will lose the near complete control and domination they currently exercise. That appears to be unacceptable to them.

But after their historic failure to prepare for the Covid-19 pandemic exposed corporate healthcare’s dangerous fragility, corporate executives have made precious few structural changes and hospitals have been bailed out repeatedly. Just in time delivery for critical supplies is dangerous. You can’t permanently staff a healthcare system with temporary labor. You can’t keep squeezing your workforce and expect them to keep showing up. After working through the pandemic as we did, nurses know that this system can’t remain and something must change.

We didn’t choose this fight, not like this. We approached the bargaining table politely, if sternly at times. We asked them to consider what their proposals might mean for staffing and retention. We asked them to consider what we’ve been through and what we’ve given to this company (and what we’ve given up to this company!) and what we’ve given to this community. We told them what our priorities are, as modest or as generous as they were.

Providence has now made this the fight it is, and we will continue to struggle to get an agreement that appreciates a modicum of the sacrifice and commitment we’ve demonstrated. We’re going on strike next week, and the ongoing crisis in our hospitals is going to spill out into our streets. We hope the public takes notice and demands accountability from the Executives who have created this crisis and allowed it to deepen for years.

When we’re back, we’ll be reaching out to you all for guidance and feedback about how to best move forward. Until then, let’s support one another, be there for one another, and let’s tell this community the story of the healthcare workers and the patients that our system lets down. It’s not going to be an easy week, but we will get through it. It’s not going to be an easy path forward; but if we stick together, support one another, and stand up for the healthcare system our community deserves, we will be just fine, if not a little better off. Strikes have changed the trajectory of giant employers like OHSU and entire hospital systems like Kaiser Permanente. We don’t know that we’ll do that next week, but we hope to look back and see it as an important step.

We are so incredibly honored to work with all of you.

In Unity,

ONA PPMC Bargaining Team