

# Home health and day care workers strike in New York

**Our reporter**  
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Twenty-three thousand New York City home health care workers, members of 1199/SEIU, began a three-day strike beginning June 7 demanding a raise in pay from their current average of \$7 to \$10 an hour. They work for 12 nonprofit agencies which provide care for homebound and elderly patients with medical problems.

On June 9 they were joined by 7,000 day care workers beginning their own three-day walkout. The day care workers, members of District Council 1707 who work at 350 city-funded day care centers serving about 30,000 children from low-income households, have been without a contract since 2000, and the city has refused to even discuss their demand for a modest 9 percent retroactive pay increase for this period, in line with raises received by other city workers—instead offering only 3 percent effective immediately and another 2 percent next year.

The two strikes in quick succession reflect the growing anger and militancy among lower-paid workers in the face of poverty wages and conditions, even as the gap between the rich and poor continues to grow. Furthermore, thousands of teachers and other city employees demonstrated on June 8, in the midst of the actions of the health care and day care workers.

Twelve thousand home health care aides rallied in midtown Manhattan on the first day of their strike and shouted down their union leader, left-talking Dennis Rivera, when he announced a settlement with one of the 12 agencies and then proposed that the strike be called off after one day. Rivera asked the workers, nearly all of whom are black or Hispanic women, to give union officials 30 days to carry out further negotiations. He read a statement from billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg asking the union “to end its job action and return to work in order to minimize the disruption of

patient care,” and this only seemed to anger the workers further.

Nor did the presence of New York Senator Charles Schumer and former Vermont governor and Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean on the platform impress them with the need to get back on the job. They shouted “No!” and Rivera was heard to mutter, “I wasn’t expecting this,” while claiming the vote was “democracy in action.”

By the end of the day the union announced agreement with four of the home health agencies, and 12,000 of the 23,000 strikers returned to work on June 8. However, the deals did not provide for the \$10 hourly rate by 2006, as originally demanded. Most of these workers will have to wait three years to see even that low pay rate, and some will have to wait until 2008. The other agencies, employing about half of the aides, had not reached any deal by the end of the strike.

The members of Local 205 of DC 1707 are also angry after working for four years without a contract. They held a rally at Borough Hall in Brooklyn on June 9 and then marched across the Brooklyn Bridge to a bigger demonstration at City Hall. Many parents identified wholeheartedly with the workers who care for their children, and brought their children to the City Hall rally to lend their support. As one parent said, her child’s teachers at the Helen Owen Carey Center in Brooklyn, hard pressed for supplies, “even spend out of their own pocket for things like costumes and special treats.”

The union leaders ensured that the day care and health care strikes were separated. The teachers and firefighters were brought into a common protest with members of the police union, while ignoring the struggles of the lower-paid workers. And Democratic politicians were paraded before protesting workers on

three successive days in order to peddle the illusion that a section of big business will grant their demands.

The willingness of the union bureaucracy to surrender past gains and the absence of any serious struggle against the ongoing assault on living standards and social conditions have convinced large sections of the ruling elite that there is no need even to pretend to consider the workers' demands. Hence Bloomberg's reaction to the demonstration of more than 10,000 teachers and other municipal employees that took place in the midst of the health care and day care strikes. The mayor arrogantly declared, "If they spent half of the time coming to the bargaining table, rather than protesting, they'd probably do a lot better."

The day care and health care strikes, however, though limited and lacking any strategy to fight back, clearly reflect changes in thinking among hundreds of thousands of workers in New York. The very existence of these workers, particularly the lower-paid, largely immigrant and minority sections of the workforce, is barely acknowledged in the media and by the political establishment, but the latest strikes indicate that these workers are increasingly searching for a way forward.



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