

Detroit area nursing home workers locked out

Our correspondent
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More than 200 nursing home workers who were fired and locked out on June 24 are holding daily protests in front of several facilities operated by MediLodge in the Detroit metropolitan area. The company fired the workers at facilities in Southfield, Royal Oak, Bloomfield Hills and Rochester Hills when their union, Service Employees International Union Local 79, called off a threatened strike after year-long negotiations for a new contract broke down.

Management cancelled negotiations and arbitrarily fired any worker who didn't show up at 7 a.m. on June 24, even if he or she had been scheduled to work the afternoon shift or had the day off. One of the fired workers was on federal family medical leave to deal with her son's asthma. According to a statement by MediLodge's attorneys, the workers were "terminated for engaging in an unlawful strike."

Carrying signs reading, "Fired on my day off" and "Unfair and double-crossed," the protesting workers accused MediLodge of having little regard for the care of their elderly patients, pointing to the fact that the company has hired inexperienced replacements to do the work of dietary, nursing and other aides who have as much as 28 years of service at the four facilities.

Several nursing home workers, who have been without a contract for nine months, spoke to the WSW. "Our main concern is with staffing and supplies," said one worker with three years of service at the Royal Oak facility. "We want more soap, washed clothing and towels. There are only two aides for each floor who have to take care of 40 residents. We have to shower and feed the residents and because we're short-staffed by the time you bring them their food it is cold. On top of that, starting wages are only \$10.75 an hour."

Another worker added, "We want dignity and respect as aides. We're the backbone of this place. We're always short of staff, bed sheets and other supplies. Management is always trying to cut corners. Just like

all the other big companies, all they want is cheap labor and big profits."

Despite the blatant union-busting by MediLodge management, SEIU Local 79 has left the locked out workers isolated and limited its efforts to appeals to the National Labor Relations Board and to the company to return to the bargaining table. Nothing has been done to mobilize support from SEIU Local 79's nearly 60,000 members in the Detroit area, who include health-care and nursing home employees, home health-care workers, janitors and other building service workers.

In nearby Toledo, Ohio nursing home workers are also facing a bitter fight. Four of the eight facilities have refused to sign new contracts after their expiration on July 1 and are demanding that SEIU members pay a portion of their health insurance, a concession which would amount to a 73-cent-an-hour pay cut from their already low wages. At least one facility threatened to shut down if it did not achieve its demand. Workers overwhelmingly rejected the giveback and the union has threatened a strike on July 25 if no agreement is reached.

The eleventh-hour decision to call off the strike and the continued isolation of the locked out workers has only encouraged MediLodge management to victimize its workers and press forward with its demands. This only makes all the more farcical the claim that the SEIU and its international president Andrew Stern are leading an insurgent movement against AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and the rest of the labor bureaucracy.



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