

Hospital workers rally in downtown Baltimore

Our reporters
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On Saturday, workers at Johns Hopkins Hospital (JHH) held a rally, entitled “Mothers’ March & Rally for Justice at Johns Hopkins,” near the Inner Harbor in downtown Baltimore, Maryland, to demand a \$15 minimum wage for employees with 15 years’ experience or more, with lesser amounts given to new hires. The rally was called after contract negotiations broke down a little more than a week ago between the hospital and the workers’ union, SEIU United Healthcare Workers East Local 1199. Last month, the hospital’s 2,000 caregivers went on a three-day strike in anticipation of the contract negotiations. However, the strike ended without a single demand being agreed to by management.

Johns Hopkins Medicine (JHM), overseeing the hospital as well as Johns Hopkins University, is the largest employer in the Baltimore region. The nonprofit has an annual budget of \$6.5 billion and received more than \$2.59 billion in federal grants for the year 2012. In 2013, the hospital reported an operating surplus of \$145 million. A significant factor in the attack on JHH workers is the Affordable Care Act (ACA), the signature domestic health care “reform” of the Obama administration. Due to its implementation, hospitals across the US have sought to cut costs in treatment for patients as well as wages. In Maryland, more than \$330 million is expected to be recouped over the next five years in Medicare payments alone from this process.

Many workers at JHH have been forced to seek living accommodations at homeless shelters due to their low pay. Under current conditions, non-nurse caregivers at JHH—who include maintenance workers, janitors, technical workers, kitchen staff and other employees—make less than the threshold that would qualify a single parent to receive food stamps—\$14.91 an hour—with some making as little as \$10.71. In its

contract proposal, the hospital offered workers a minimum wage of just \$12.25, which would grow by a mere 2 percent over a four-year period.

Despite the immense difficulties faced by the hospital’s workers, the demands raised by the SEIU—for a “Fair Wage” of \$15 an hour—would still leave the majority of workers on the brink of poverty. Even this amount would only be given to a tiny number of workers with more than 15 years’ experience.

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* attending the event distributing the leaflet “Mobilize the working class to defend Johns Hopkins workers!” and spoke to a number of Johns Hopkins workers in attendance. Yvonne Brown, who is in her 60s, explained that she could not survive without the help of government assistance. “I make \$12.80 an hour,” she said, which equates to about “\$680 every two weeks.” Yvonne explained that her monthly housing costs, at \$710 monthly, alone ate up more than half of her paycheck in the same period.

Natina, who asked not to have her picture taken, said she was “embarrassed” by how little pay she received while working at the hospital. “The management is getting wages, they can give us workers wages [too],” she said. Natina, who makes \$13.71 an hour, explained the difficulties of making ends meet, raising children, and paying more than \$1,500 a month for rent. “Johns Hopkins caregivers have been working with their wages frozen for the past 10 years,” she said, adding that “just because the hospital refuses to pay us enough to keep up with the cost of living, doesn’t mean that my rent isn’t going to go up.” “The only reason why we stay here is for the patients,” she added.

Natina—a member of the hospital workers’ bargaining committee—was asked by WSWs reporters about the abortive strike that had occurred among the caregivers a

month earlier. She stated said that the strike had largely been for show, with the union failing to even provide the local with any funds during the ordeal. “Throughout the entire strike, we kept asking ourselves ‘where the hell is New York?’ ” she said, referring to the SEIU’s large membership throughout the east coast, who could have provided support.

Throughout the event, efforts were made by organizers to cultivate an unserious and uncritical attitude to the role of the union throughout the dispute. Held in downtown Baltimore, nearly a half-hour’s drive from the hospital itself, the event was addressed by well-heeled union executives and a number of movie celebrities, including Danny Glover and *The Wire* ’s Wendell Pierce. All speakers sought to represent the union as waging a heroic struggle for its members against the entrenched power of management. No speaker sought to mention the strike that had occurred a month earlier. Similarly, no speaker sought to draw the connection between the implementation of the Affordable Care Act and the attacks on workers, both of which the union supports.

Significantly, only a tiny portion of the workers in attendance were employed at JHH, with more than half the union membership present having been bused in from outside of the area, many of whom who had been kept unaware of the details of the dispute at the hospital.

Ian Medina and Ulices Delos-Nueces are two younger workers who were bused in from Brooklyn, New York. Ian and Ulices came out to support fellow workers in their struggle for a decent job, but were not aware of the details of the negotiations between the SEIU and JHH. “We’re here to support the workers in getting better pay,” Ian said. When asked by reporters for their thoughts about the demand for a \$15 wage, Ulices noted that, “with the rate of inflation, it doesn’t add up. It’s not enough.” “Right, they just say ‘here’s the increase now shut up,’ ” added Ian.

When asked by the two workers what should be done, a WSWS reporter stated that the SEIU is incapable of meeting the needs of workers. “These struggles are not limited to the JHH workers.” The reporter went on to say that “all sections of the working class have been devastated by the rising cost of living and the stagnation of wages simultaneously while facing opposition from their unions in the fight for better pay.”

“I remember reading about how the Boeing workers were told to accept a sellout contract or face losing their jobs with the removal of production to another state,” said Ian, of workers in the state of Washington who had rejected a sellout contract by their union late last year. “It’s good cop, bad cop. Both parties are attacking workers,” he added.



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