Maryland governor blocks strike by Johns Hopkins Hospital workers

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In the latest in a series of attacks on non-nursing workers at Johns Hopkins Hospital, Maryland's Democratic Governor Martin O'Malley intervened last Thursday to prevent a four-day strike by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) United Healthcare Workers East Local 1199 planned for Friday, June 27. The walkout over the breakdown of negotiations would have been the second by the hospital's nearly 2,000 maintenance, technical and janitorial workers in as many months. Workers have been without a contract for nearly four months.

"Today I urged 1199 SEIU and the Johns Hopkins Hospital management to take a one week cooling off period," said the governor in a statement, adding, "1199 SEIU has agreed not to strike at this time—I appreciate both sides' willingness to continue negotiating in good faith."

The immediate cause of the breakdown of talks is a failure to agree on wage rates. The union has called for a wage increase for new hires to a minimum of $14 per hour and a base-wage of $15 for workers with more than 15 years' experience. The hospital—claiming there is only a "finite pool of funds"—has agreed to the $15 minimum for more senior workers, but has left the base wage for new hires at $12.25, less than $2 more than the current $10.71 minimum at its facilities. Highlighting the piecemeal character of the demands by the union, the proposed minimum pay for new hires would place a single parent beneath the $14.91 threshold to receive food stamps, no matter which offer was accepted.

For their part, union officials welcomed the governor's intervention. "The governor seems to think that the cooling-off period is necessary, and maybe that will result in positive dialogue," John Reid, the executive vice president of the Maryland-DC 1199 SEIU United Healthcare Workers East, told the *Baltimore Sun*.

The hospital is part of the larger Johns Hopkins Medicine (JHM) complex, which is affiliated with the world-renowned Johns Hopkins University. JHM operates with a nearly $6.5 billion budget and is the largest employer in the Baltimore area. Last year, JHH Director Ron Peterson received a total of $15.4 million in compensation, including pension and retirement payouts. In a Thursday op-ed piece in the *Baltimore Sun*, hospital employee Yvonne Brown, who worked at JHH for 19 years said her expected pension package would be $9,500 a year. Brown added that despite her seniority, she currently made only $12.97 hourly at the hospital.

"Now, we're not asking to be paid like CEOs. We're just saying CEOs shouldn't make all the money," said Brown, adding, "President Peterson could pay for all the increases we're asking for out of his 2013 compensation and still have $4.2 million left over."

From the beginning, the SEIU has sought to block any genuine struggle by hospital workers and has used a series of ineffective walkouts—essentially publicity stunts—to dissipate anger. Meanwhile, behind the scenes union officials have worked with hospital management and the Democratic establishment to further cut labor costs.

In April, the union held a three-day work stoppage. The strike was shut down without meeting any of the workers' demands. The union also gave management ample time to hire nonunion workers to serve as strikebreakers. In May, the union held a rally at Baltimore's Inner Harbor to cover up its role in shutting down the previous strike. Union officials also sought to conceal the broader political questions involved in the attack on health care and health care

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workers, in particular the role of the Democratic Party.

The SEIU has supported and collaborated in the implementation of President Obama's signature health care overhaul, the Affordable Care Act (ACA). As a condition for further federal reimbursements in funds, Obama has sought to enact cost-cutting measures in patient treatments at hospitals as well as employee pay. In Maryland, a commission has been established in order to claw back over $330 million in such reimbursements over the next five years.

SEIU has supported this process and was one of the first unions to endorse Obama's reelection campaign in 2011. Most recently, SEIU 1199 endorsed the candidacy of Maryland Lt. Governor Anthony Brown in the state's governor race. Brown, who has served as co-chair of Maryland's Health Care Reform Coordinating Council, has overseen the region's adoption of the ACA, including the implementation of the state's ill-fated health care exchanges.

The SIEU's $15 "Fair Wage" campaign is of a piece with broader attempts by the unions and pseudo-left groups like Socialist Alternative to promote Obama's fraudulent "fight against inequality," which has included a call for a hike in the minimum wage. In fact, even in the places where such measures have been adopted, workers' wages will trail well behind the average costs of living. In the mid-Atlantic Baltimore and Washington DC area, the cost of living is one of the most expensive in the country. A 2013 study by the liberal Economic Policy Institute (EPI) found that a family of four would need to earn at least $88,000 a year to live in normal conditions in the Washington, DC area. This would require a nearly $28-per-hour minimum wage for a worker living in the region.

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