

Minnesota nursing home workers carry out two-day strike

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14 June 2019

Over 100 workers at the Guardian Angels nursing home in Elk River, Minnesota staged a two-day strike on June 6 and 7 to demand safe staffing and increased wages. The limited walkout was called by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Healthcare Minnesota after the failure to reach an agreement on a new contract after 10 negotiating sessions.

For-profit nursing home chains across the United States are notorious for low wages, poor working conditions and often poor elder care. The Guardian Angels Care Center in Elk River is no different with the exception that its workforce has maintained a five-star rating for their facility in spite of short staffing and miserable living standards.

“The problem right now is that Guardian Angels has an outside agency coming in that is providing nursing assistants and RNs (registered nurses) to care for our residents because they can’t staff the facility,” Nicole Mellum, a nursing assistant and TMA (Trained Medication Aid) who has worked at Guardian Angels for 14 years, told the WSWs.

“Our wages are so crappy nobody wants to come in and work for us,” said Avis Lage, a dietician with seven years at Guardian. “There’s nothing that attracts people here. They’re only offering us a wage increase of 1.25 percent. And they started at a quarter percent! But that’s traditional for Guardian. Six years ago we only got wage increases of six cents, seven cents and six cents [across a three-year contract].”

“Our CEO, Dan Dixon, makes over \$220,000 a year,” Nicole added. “That was in 2017. And he’s not the only one who makes a six-digit figure salary in this company.”

Despite workers putting up with deplorable conditions, the nursing home receives top ratings, Avis pointed out. “The health department came in and we

got a zero-deficiency rating. Because we’re good and we care. But we’re at a breaking point. We’ve been abused for so long.”

Guardian also wants to gut Personal Time Off (PTO). Jane Gardner, also a Nursing Assistant and TMA with 14 years said, “We have language in our contract that says any changes to our PTO policy, they have to bargain with the union. The company wants to take that out. Right now, we can accrue up to 320 hours. But the company’s other facilities can only accrue PTO up to 200 hours. If you accrue beyond that, you lose it.”

When strikers were asked about safe staffing, Avis said, “Did you hear those chants? ‘Monday, Tuesday, working short. Wednesday, Thursday, working short.’”

“Every day they mandate you,” explained Jane. “You work 8 hours, then they mandate you to work another 8 hours. If they could, they would mandate you another 8 hours, but it’s illegal to work over 16 hours straight. If it’s an overnight shift, you find out at 11:00 PM at the end of your shift. If somebody doesn’t show up, you’re staying until 7:30 AM the next morning. If you leave, you’re threatened with job abandonment. If anything happens to a patient, it’s your fault.”

“It’s not safe for the resident and it’s not safe for the staff,” said Jody Winter, who has 30 years seniority at Guardian. “We’re hoping through this strike they’ll hear our voice and want us to come back to the table for negotiations. We want respect, we want great care for our residents, and we want continuity so the residents have the same people every day. It’s very important.”

The Elk River facility is not the only property that Guardian owns or manages. They command an array of facilities including day cares, senior cooperatives, catering, assisted living and memory care. According to *Workday Minnesota*, in 2017 their profits were over \$1.8 million.

In every state, corporations have consolidated elder care facilities into chains where profit trumps the care provided to residents and the treatment of their workforces. Nursing home chains have increasingly come under the control of giant hedge funds, including the Carlyle Group, which target the life savings of seniors and profit through cost-cutting.

The Democrats and Republicans, by cutting Medicaid and Medicare and giving tax breaks to the rich, have intensified the crisis of nursing homes and the healthcare system as a whole, leading nursing home companies to further squeeze living standards workers.

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) is notorious for signing sweetheart contracts that enforce low wages and miserable conditions in exchange for collecting dues from the workers it claims to represent. The two-day strike is largely aimed at allowing workers to let off steam as the SEIU prepares to sign yet another pro-company deal.

The strike also takes place as the contracts expire for 13,000 nurses and other hospital workers in the Twin Cities at Allina and other area hospitals. Like the SEIU, the Minnesota Nurses Association is allied with the Democratic Party and has been complicit in imposing the cost-cutting measures that were central to President Obama's corporate-driven health care "reform."

The struggles of different sections of the working class must be forged into a joint struggle against the corporations, banks and the Democratic and Republican parties that do their bidding.

Throughout Minnesota, across the United States and globally, the class struggle is sharpening. In Minnesota, warehouse workers, Amazon workers and Jennie-O meatpacking workers are coming into struggle, along with the nurses in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area. Guardian Angels and other workers involved in struggles should elect rank-and-file committees and send delegations of workers to link these isolated struggles together and forge the unity of the entire working class against the profit system.



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