

More than 7,800 nurses and hospital staff strike for third day at Seattle hospitals

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More than 7,800 nurses and caregivers at Swedish medical centers in Seattle struck for a third day Thursday against short staffing levels and inadequate compensation. The strike had been called by Service Employees International Union Healthcare (SEIU) Local 1199 NW after more than nine months of negotiations with the hospital chain. The strike involves nurses, nursing assistants, lab workers, environmental service technicians, dietary workers, clerks and other health care workers.

The two medical centers affected are Swedish Redmond in eastern Seattle and Swedish Ballard in the west of the city. SEIU-UHW previously announced that the strike would end at 7:30 a.m. local time on Friday.

The two hospitals are owned by the giant health care conglomerate Providence St. Joseph, the largest health care system on the west coast of the US in terms of number of hospitals, clinics and patient beds. The company, listed as a not-for-profit health care system, operates in seven states and includes 51 hospitals, 829 physician clinics and employs more than 100,000 workers overall.

It is the product of a wave of mergers and acquisitions in the health care industry that took place in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Providence St. Joseph is the product of a 2016 merger between Providence Health & Services and St. Joseph Health. Prior to that event, Providence Health & Services had acquired Swedish Health in 2012 of which Swedish Redmond and Swedish Ballard were a part.

Providence reacted to this week's strike by closing emergency rooms and urgent care facilities at both hospitals while hiring hundreds of temporary workers to take the place of striking nurses. Swedish also rescheduled all elective surgeries, patient classes and some other procedures until the strike finished.

Many striking nurses were critical of the decision to close the emergency rooms as preparations had been made in advance to insure critical patient needs would be met in the event of a strike with many suspecting that the maneuver had been made with the intent to turn patients and the public against the workers. The labor and delivery unit at the Ballard campus had also closed after the strike began and isn't slated to reopen until Friday.

Speaking to the *Seattle Times*, Woodes Rogers, a nurse at the Ballard facility, worried that patients would find out too late about the emergency room closures. "People don't have any idea," Rogers said. "I think that makes for a pretty risky and dangerous situation because the longer you wait for treatment, the worse your options get."

After the SEIU announced the strike last week, hospital officials also revoked their latest contract offer and announced they would not bargain with the union until pickets ended. The latest offer included a 11.25 percent increase over the next four years. This is approximately equivalent to the current CPI increase for the state of Washington, meaning that workers will receive no actual increase in real income should the hospital's terms be agreed to.

Hospital workers are only receiving \$40 in strike pay per day while Providence has spent more than \$11 million to fly in replacement workers from across the country. Moreover, on Thursday the *Seattle Times* revealed that the company would lock out a significant portion of the striking workers. According to Swedish spokeswoman Tiffany Moss, the replacement workers would remain on site until their contract finishes at 7 a.m. local time Sunday and that only some of the striking workers, whose schedules had been set well in advance of the strike, would be able to work during

their regularly scheduled shifts on Friday and Saturday. “We will call people back as needed,” Moss said.

The union responded to the coming lockout, stating, “As this is an unfair-labor-practice strike, locking out workers would be illegal, because union members made an unconditional offer to return to work after the strike at 7:30 a.m. Friday morning.” At this point, it isn’t clear whether or not the SEIU will file a suit with the notoriously pro-employer National Labor Relations Board for back pay and damages as a result of the lockout. The fact that Providence negotiated longer contracts with replacement staff after ample notice of the strike end date given by the union only indicates that they don’t take any such challenge seriously.

In fact, the past decades have witnessed the trade unions deliberately isolating and containing health care strikes under conditions of rising anger among health care workers and patients alike.

In the event that the unions cannot stop strikes from happening they keep them limited to only a handful of days to minimize impact.

It was the SEIU that called off a strike at the last minute in October involving more than 80,000 workers at the Kaiser Permanente hospital conglomerate. This would have been the largest single US strike in nearly two decades. In exchange for heading off this struggle, SEIU officials partnered with Kaiser in creating the \$130 million Futuro Health training center. None of the main demands of the strikers were met for better staffing ratios, pay and benefits with a very strong possibility that the training center will be used like similar union-led training centers such as those run by the United Auto Workers in Detroit, i.e., as a slush fund for union officials.

Other actions in the past two years have included a three-day strike of University of California Hospital workers in 2018, a three-day strike of Rhode Island Hospital workers and a two-day strike at the University of Virginia Medical Center.

The strikes come in the midst of an ongoing crisis in the health care industry. The astronomical cost of care coupled with deteriorating conditions have given rise to mass working class anger for which the profit system offers no solution. Every Democratic presidential candidate has now been compelled to offer solutions to the broken health care system. None will be implemented should they occupy the Oval Office.

In fact, many of the candidates felt compelled to address the Swedish hospital strike, with Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders, Pete Buttigieg and Joe Biden all tweeting statements of support. The candidates have also instructed members of their respective campaigns to show up at picket lines.

Hospital workers need to reject the poison of both the Democratic Party and the trade unions who ultimately seek to keep their struggles contained and maintain the profits of the insurance, pharmaceutical and hospital industry at the expense of patient care. A struggle against a single or a handful of hospitals, when those hospitals are owned by conglomerates managing dozens or even hundreds of facilities, is doomed to failure. The most urgent task is the formation of rank-and-file committees of health care workers across all hospitals and regions.



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