

“This pandemic is showing that something is wrong in our society”

# 10,000 nursing home workers vote to strike in Illinois in the face of life-threatening working conditions

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On Monday, 10,000 workers at 40 Illinois nursing homes, the majority in the Chicago area, voted to strike May 8, one week after the current collective bargaining agreement with the nursing home companies and the Service Employees International Union Healthcare Illinois-Indiana (SEIU HCII) union officially ends.

The workers are demanding personal protective equipment (PPE), safety protocols, hazard pay, an increase in base pay, paid time off for COVID-related illness, increased staffing, health insurance and transparency about COVID-19 cases in the nursing homes, where in Illinois 35 percent of the states' nearly 2,000 deaths have occurred.

Nursing home workers, nurses and nursing assistants risk their lives each day while working during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many have been fired for requesting adequate PPE in facilities with confirmed cases. In a livestreamed video on the SEIU Healthcare IL & IN Facebook page, one worker recounted that she was fired for demanding PPE, more staff, and transparent communication from the Alden Wentworth nursing home in Chicago, part of the Chicago-area Alden Network of for-profit long-term care facilities where patients and workers have died from COVID-19.

“How hard is it for the governor to get us a proper mask? Can you imagine telling a child that her mother is dead from something that was completely preventable?” she asked.

The parasitic for-profit nursing home industry brings in billions of dollars for private equity firms, real estate trusts and Wall Street investors. Before the pandemic broke out, the value of the US long-term care market was projected to reach \$737.1 billion by 2026 with a compounded annual growth rate of over 7 percent.

A registered nurse who has worked at nursing homes throughout the Chicago area spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* in support of the nursing home workers' strike vote, describing the deplorable conditions and lack of

resources that underlay the COVID-19 outbreaks.

“I’m in agreement with them going on strike. It’s about time they stand up for themselves. I have been in contact with old co-workers, and can only imagine the conditions now that COVID-19 is here. If they were lacking the supplies before, imagine what it is like now. One of my old workplaces was a 146-bed facility, and on the night shift there were two nurses and two assistants (CNAs) for one eight-hour shift.

“People are scared to go to work because of COVID-19. It’s not worth losing their lives for \$9 to \$10 per hour. That’s why there is a short supply of CNAs and nurses. At one facility I heard all the CNAs except one quit after they heard about COVID-19.

“These conditions are dangerous for patients and staff. We need to get proper rest so we can care for the patients. The workers are paid very low wages, there are not enough staff, and [the nursing homes] ask you to work 16 hours every day, to the point that you can’t say no. Instead of hiring more staff, they give out overtime.

“At that facility, they had no proper PPE, no masks, and were told they could not wear a mask because of ‘dignity.’ As soon as there were confirmed COVID-19 cases they got masks, but they had to wear the same one all week. We are taught in nursing school that we are supposed to discard the mask between rooms.

“The CNAs have been paid low wages as long as I can remember, and they are owed higher. I was in CNA school in 1998, and I was paid \$4.25 per hour. Since then the pay rates have not been brought up that much. After paying car insurance, bus fare, and health insurance, that paycheck is gone.

“The assistants do the heavy lifting. They see patients, bathe them, dress them, they are their companions. As nurses we are the eyes and ears of the doctors, but the CNAs

are the nurses' eyes.”

The strike vote by nursing home staff is part of a wave of international working class resistance. Boiling anger is developing among frontline and essential workers who are laboring without adequate PPE, as well as workers in non-essential industries who are beginning to be forced back into crowded and unsanitary conditions while the pandemic rages on. On virtually every continent, health care workers, call center workers, autoworkers, Amazon workers, grocery workers and many others have walked out or refused to go to work in opposition to the demands of finance capital and the capitalist states.

It is critical now more than ever that nurses, CNAs and other workers at nursing homes take the fight into their own hands, independent of the unions such as SEIU, which over decades has sabotaged one struggle after another. Rank-and-file safety committees must be formed to demand adequate protective equipment and staffing levels, substantial wage increases and hazard pay, and a massive infusion of resources, not into the bank accounts of the nursing home companies and investors, but toward meeting the needs of the elderly and the workers who care for them.

The SEIU, with locals across North America, is run like a corporation that contracts underpaid workers to giant health care and service corporations. Its net assets totaled \$375,382,025 in 2019. In comparison to the extremely low wages of the workers who pay dues to the union, SEIU International President Mary Kay Henry was compensated a total of \$289,994 in 2019, placing her well within the top 5 percent of society by income.

Workers denounced the SEIU on Facebook following the strike announcement. One worker wrote: “I’m in this union too as a caregiver [and get] no HAZARD PAY! This union is so RECKLESS!...Bet the union office people are getting PAID pretty comfortable either way!”

In 2017, after 19 months of working without a contract, Illinois nursing home workers were betrayed by the SEIU, which pushed through a concessions agreement, blocking a strike against the nursing home companies. The agreement continued the regime of poverty wages, with a pitiful \$3 per hour raise over three years for the majority of workers, whose wages had been frozen in several previous years at an average of \$11 per hour. In January of this year, the SEIU also worked with Illinois Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker to push through a poverty wage contract for 30,000 home health care assistants and child care workers in Illinois.

“They should have gone on strike four years ago in the last contract,” the nurse continued. “Back then, the SEIU settled for a \$1 per hour raise [each year], and I saw the hurt in the CNAs’ eyes when they found out—they thought, ‘you settled for that?’

“This is the problem—[the SEIU] settle for the bare minimum. The way that it’s going, we are not going to have any CNAs in the future because no one will want to do all of that work for the pay. More patients will die, will be neglected and abused, and all of this is totally preventable.

“For-profit nursing homes are atrocious for what they are doing. The nursing homes are the hardest hit with the virus because staff members working multiple jobs in different facilities that are not the cleanest—this spreads the virus and is why you are seeing widespread outbreaks. Staff can’t wash their hands, they can’t clean the rooms, they can’t practice social distancing.

“I’ve seen residents not being offered water with their meals because the CNAs don’t have time. They are not able to get the showers they need. It’s a shame that this is happening in America, but it’s actually happening all over the world.

“What type of care would you want for your family members? You would want the best. But because they are not paying the CNAs good wage, and not giving them PPE, who is it hurting the most? The patients.”

In response to the news that US billionaires increased their wealth by \$280 billion since March, while medical workers were left to risk their lives for minimum wages, the nurse responded, “This money should be put into giving the nursing homes what they need. That money is being thrown away to things that don’t matter, the livelihoods of people are what matter right now. These corporations need to go away.

“I would tell [the workers] to hold the line. Do not cross it, do not break it, because now is the time. Something has to change and this pandemic is showing us that something is wrong in our society.”



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