

Illinois nursing home workers' strike blocked by SEIU

Jessica Goldstein
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The Service Employees International Union Healthcare Illinois-Indiana (SEIU HCII) and the Illinois Association of Health Care Facilities (IAHCF) blocked a strike of nearly 10,000 nursing home workers across the state late Wednesday night. Nursing home workers, including certified nursing assistants (CNAs) and support staff at 64 facilities across Illinois, were set to go on strike today.

In what can only be described as a cowardly act of betrayal, the SEIU kowtowed to the corporate interests of the long-term care facility managers and the shareholders and private equity firms that own them by pushing through a concessions contract that gave the IAHCF everything it wanted and leaves nursing home workers in poverty and working under life-threatening conditions in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The nursing home workers voted to go on strike on April 25 by a majority of roughly 60 percent, five days before the old contract expired. The workers have demanded 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, which account for 44 percent of COVID-19 related deaths in the state of Illinois.

That thousands of workers essential to the functioning of society were ready to sacrifice everything to fight for their right to higher wages and safe working conditions only underscores the brutality of the conditions faced by health care workers in a system subordinated to the interests of private profit.

While it tried to posture as a militant union that fights for the workers, the SEIU was actively working to hide the details of the negotiations behind closed doors with the nursing home management companies. At stake were issues of life or death for the rank and file.

A home health care worker in Illinois and member of the SEIU spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* and denounced its betrayals of the workers it supposedly represents.

"This union is very disappointing," the worker said. "I'm

sure their office union people are getting paid better than us out in the field. Without us out in the field [and] in our cars, they would not have the jobs they do behind closed doors! I started with them July 2016 at \$10.05 per hour; now I'm paid \$13.15 per hour. I'm working 120 hours every two weeks, plus the union took away our overtime this year.

"The health insurance is crap. Even though it's free, it only covers 80 percent of costs. All they are offering is 15 days off paid if we get sick with this virus. This union is so reckless and very cheap. They want to give us PPE only and no hazard pay!"

The worker supported the call to unite the working class in a struggle for the basic rights of higher wages and adequate health and safety during the pandemic. "We all should be treated equally, it goes for all working Americans, I think. [We should] work with each other, not against each other. We all should fight for what's right. no matter what essential job we are in."

The latest betrayal is par for the course for the SEIU, which over decades has sabotaged one struggle after another. 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.

On the SEIU Healthcare IL & IN Facebook page, home care and childcare workers denounced the union for isolating them from the nursing home workers and negotiating separate contracts, pitting one section of workers against the other. 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 childcare workers in Illinois.

On Tuesday, *Crain's Chicago Business* reported in an article frozen behind a paywall that the IAHCF, which represents the business interests of the long-term care

management companies in the state, had proposed a pathetic \$2-per-hour base wage raise plus an additional \$2 per hour in bonus pay for the remainder of the pandemic in an attempt to push through a contract and block a strike.

The SEIU reportedly rejected this offer, according to a representative of the IAHCF. However, no updates on the bargaining had been published on the union's website or Facebook page until Thursday, when it announced that the sellout deal had been reached.

On its official news page, the union made clear that it sided with the interests of the nursing homes' management and proudly declared its betrayal of the rank-and-file workers in a post headlined "HISTORIC STRIKE AVERTED AS NURSING HOME WORKERS WIN TENTATIVE AGREEMENT PROVIDING FOR ESSENTIAL RESOURCES FOR THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND."

The concessions contract announced by the union in this "victory" include poverty baseline wages of barely above \$15 an hour for all workers; an unspecified rate of hazard pay for all workers for the duration of the COVID-19 crisis; an unspecified number of additional fully paid sick days for COVID-19-related testing, illness or quarantine for duration of the crisis; and vague, unenforceable "provisions ensuring that employees are not required to work without adequate PPE as determined by regulatory agencies for the duration of the crisis."

These contract provisions are essentially no different than what the nursing home management offered earlier in the week.

The SEIU collaborated with the pseudo-left "Poor People's Campaign" ahead of the official strike date. This was done to diffuse political anger among nursing home workers toward the capitalist system and class-based social inequality in an attempt to channel it behind operatives of the Democratic Party.

The opportunist organization denies the need for a political struggle based in the working class against the capitalist system, and promotes the dead end of identity politics and nationalism, and the idealistic call for "moral revival" instead of a demand to expropriate the wealth of the capitalist class to be placed under the control of the working class and used to meet the needs of society.

It is now critical that nursing home workers reject the opportunist pro-corporate politics of the unions and their allies in the Democratic Party and the pseudo-left and take the necessary steps to bring the fight for their wages and livelihoods under their control. They must reject the phony sellout deal, which no worker has seen in full, that the SEIU and corporations are attempting to use to force them back into the nursing homes where they face increased risk of

COVID-19 infection and death.

Health care workers, including nursing home workers, have immense support for their struggles among the working class, not just in the US but internationally. Many sections of workers supported the strike vote when it was announced. The nursing home workers must learn from the lessons of autoworkers, call center, Amazon and grocery workers and others around the world who have taken their struggles into their own hands and coordinated independent walkouts in opposition to corrupt unions like the SEIU.

We call on nursing home workers in Illinois to form independent rank-and-file committees, including strike committees and safety committees 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 Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site* will do everything it can to provide political support to workers who wish to build these committees.

In opposition to the efforts of the SEIU to isolate and pit workers against each other, these committees must reach out to other groups of health care workers and other sections of the working class, including manufacturing workers, meatpacking workers, teachers, retail and logistics workers across the state, country and the world, in order to carry the struggle forward and nationalize the health care industry in every country.

A solution to the pandemic and the economic crisis faced by the working class worldwide requires an international solution that can only be solved by putting an end to the capitalist system, which subordinates all life on earth to private profit, and replacing it with a scientifically planned system of socialism, in which the means of production are democratically controlled by the working class to meet the needs of society.



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