SEIU pushes through sellout contract after blocking strike by Illinois nursing home workers

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18 May 2020

After blocking a strike earlier this month, the Service Employees International Union Healthcare Illinois-Indiana (SEIU HCII) has forced 10,000 nursing home workers in Illinois to remain on the job with poverty wages and no serious protections against COVID-19. Last month, nursing home workers across Illinois voted by a wide margin to strike on April 25.

The union hastily pushed through a contract vote and announced ratification of the two-year contract late on May 14, barely giving workers a week to read through the tentative agreement. SEIU officials deliberately kept the rank and file in the dark during negotiations, suppressing information on the bargaining on its Facebook page and website.

In voting to strike, the workers 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 now account for nearly 50 percent of COVID-19 related deaths in Illinois.

A summary of the tentative agreement and signed tentative agreement between the union and the Illinois Association of Health Care Facilities (IAHCF) is posted to the union website, but the details of the final agreement have not been made publicly available.

Under the new contract, new hires in Chicago nursing homes will be paid between $15.00 and $15.50 based on their job category in the first year of the contract and will only earn up to $16.00 or $16.50 by the end of the contract. Some Illinois nursing home workers outside of Chicago will earn even less based on their job category.

Most insultingly, only a $2 per hour minimum on top of base wages has been included as hazard pay under the new agreement. The hazard pay will only be extended for a period of 45 days and only applies to those workers who are caring for residents of nursing homes who have confirmed to test positive for COVID-19. Given the still inadequate levels of testing statewide it is likely that many nursing home workers under the contract, who are essential workers, will not be able to receive this meager bonus.

The union has agreed to just five additional days of sick leave for workers due to COVID-19 related illness, testing or quarantine. This flies in the face of medical recommendations that patients who are positive or are suspected to be positive for COVID-19 self-isolate for at least two weeks.

A central demand of nursing home workers at the outset of their struggle was the guarantee of adequate PPE for all workers. The contract does nothing to guarantee that the N95 face masks, FDA-approved sanitizers, face shields, gloves and other protective measures will be made available for the protection of these essential workers and their patients. It simply states that “No employee will be required to work without adequate PPE as provided by CDC, IDPH and local health departments regulations, guidelines, and recommendations.”

It is unclear how many nursing home workers voted on the contract and whether any have seen the full final agreement, before or after its supposed ratification. If a majority of nursing home workers did indeed vote to ratify the miserable contract, it only shows they have no confidence that the SEIU would fight for anything better.

From the very start, the SEIU, which is closely tied to the Democratic Party, was determined to suppress any strike action by nursing home workers because it could serve as a catalyst for brewing social opposition over the criminal response of the corporations and both big business parties to the pandemic. While trillions have

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been handed over to Wall Street and giant corporations, essential workers are left without basic protections, factory workers are being herded back into unsafe plants, and millions are unemployed.

The tentative agreement was quickly thrown together and announced on May 7, less than 24 hours ahead of the planned strike date. The fact that the SEIU called a strike vote at all shows that union officials feared they could lose control of rank-and-file workers if they did not find allow workers to blow off steam by voting to strike.

The ratified agreement, which the union has shamelessly trumpeted as a "victory," accedes to every demand by the Illinois Association of Health Care Facilities (IAHCF), which represents the business interests of the giant long-term care facilities. The nursing home business is largely controlled by private equity firms, which take in millions of dollars each year, primarily from Medicare and Medicaid, and run the facilities on shoestring budgets. This has led to massive understaffing and overworking of nursing home workers and deadly conditions for workers and patients.

The SEIU is responsible for betrayal after betrayal over the past several years. It has refused to address the lack of hazard pay and PPE for the home health care and childcare workers under the concessions contract it pushed through in January of this year. Instead it has told workers they should appeal to the capitalist politicians in Congress whose major preoccupation has been saving corporate profits, not lives.

Like other health care workers across the US, some nursing home workers in Illinois have been fired for speaking out on the dangerous conditions facing workers and patients. These workers have been largely abandoned by the SEIU and the new contract does nothing to protect workers who speak out from retaliation. Instead victimized workers must still go through the same onerous and bureaucratic grievance process as they had previously.

The phenomenon of high rates of COVID-19 infection and death in long-term care homes is not limited to the state of Illinois or even the US alone, but is a growing international concern among workers and families of the patients in these facilities.

Nursing home workers in Illinois must draw important lessons from this latest betrayal by the SEIU and prepare a counter-offensive to fight for their interests.

Nursing home workers should form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the corrupt unions, to fight for the following demands:

* Adequate PPE and staffing levels in all long-term care homes across the state of Illinois, overseen by rank-and-file safety committees working with trusted medical experts

* A doubling of base wages and substantial hazard pay for all health care workers

* Fully paid sick leave with no penalties or restrictions during the pandemic and free health care for all workers

* The reinstatement of all workers who have been fired for speaking out and an end to the retaliation against whistleblowers

* A massive infusion of resources, not into the bank accounts of the nursing home companies and investors but toward meeting the needs of the workers and the elderly.

To pay for these elemental necessities, the bipartisan CARES Act must be overturned, and the trillions handed to the financial institutions and giant corporations redirected to meet social needs. The fight to obtain these basic necessities is above all a political struggle, which pits the entire working class against the two-corporate controlled parties and the capitalist system they defend.

The Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site* will do everything to assist workers in this struggle. If you are a nursing home worker who is interested to learn more about how to fight for the building of rank-and-file committees in your workplace and would like share your experiences about the conditions that you face fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, please contact us today.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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