

Nurses and support staff at HCA Healthcare set to strike California hospital over cuts and PPE shortages

Benjamin Mateus
26 June 2020

One thousand nurses and support staff at HCA Healthcare are set to strike today at the Riverside Community Hospital in California over concessions the hospital chain is demanding from frontline health care workers as the coronavirus pandemic continues to spread across the US. HCA Healthcare is the largest for-profit hospital chain in the US.

Kaiser Health News reports that the nurses and support staff at HCA Healthcare, who are members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 121RN, are striking against the imposition of pay cuts and to seek an end to chronically low staffing. They are also demanding sufficient quantities of quality personal protective equipment (PPE) to enable nurses, physicians and medical staff to safely administer to patients.

Erin McIntosh, a nurse in the code blue/rapid response department at the hospital, which is located 60 miles east of Los Angeles, told the *Guardian*, “HCA has continuously not upheld their end of the mediation agreement of our nurses staying in ratio. [The agreement was made in March 2019.] We’re striking June 26 through July 6 because they didn’t want to uphold our mediation agreement.”

The nurses’ militant mood is in response to the massive assault on health care workers during the course of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, which has put their lives and well-being in danger as they fight to save the lives of the hundreds of thousands of infected people overwhelming hospitals.

According to the *Guardian*, more than 679 frontline health care workers have been identified who have died of COVID-19 in the US. Shamefully, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), due to

reporting delays and archaic systems for reporting deaths, cannot account for all the health care workers that have died. The best estimate has more than 84,000 health care personnel infected, accounting for 3.5 percent of all infected individuals in the US.

Since the pandemic took off in the US, medical personnel at 19 of HCA’s hospitals have filed complaints with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for having to reuse gowns and not being issued adequate respirators (such as N-95 masks). Despite frequent and fervent denials by HCA administrators and legal representatives, the deaths of two employees—Celia Yap-Banago, a nurse at an HCA Kansas City Hospital, and Rosa Luna, who cleaned patient rooms at the Riverside facility—have tragically confirmed the lack of sufficient protective gear.

HCA only added more salt to these wounds by warning that the company would let go 10 percent of the unionized workforce if they didn’t agree to wage freezes and elimination of contributions to the nurses’ retirement plans. This quickly led to an eruption of protests in late May at 15 HCA facilities across six states to bring attention to threats to impose cuts to hours and reassignments of nursing positions, which will result in higher patient loads for the nursing staff.

HCA Healthcare, one of the wealthiest gargantuan hospital systems, is an American-based for-profit health care corporation that owns 186 hospitals across 21 US states and the United Kingdom. Its 2019 revenue amounted to \$51.3 billion. It paid its CEO \$26 million in 2019 and has made more than \$7 billion in profits over the last two years.

The company has been at the center of several lawsuits and scandals throughout its history. Notably,

in 1997, the federal government raided the medical offices of Columbia/HCA in Texas near El Paso after a year of investigation. The case was settled three years later with HCA agreeing to pay \$745 million to resolve several Medicare fraud allegations. In 2002, HCA agreed to pay \$648.5 million to settle final charges in the long-running federal investigation that saw HCA have to pay \$1.7 billion, the largest health fraud settlement in history at the time.

HCA Healthcare was also the beneficiary of approximately \$1 billion in “bailout funds” donated to the health care conglomerate through public funds provided by Congress under the CARES Act stimulus package. According to the *New York Times*, 20 large health care systems received more than \$5 billion in federal grants while these institutions sit on more than \$100 billion in cold cash to be used to weather financial storms.

According to a study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, those health care systems that serve wealthier clients, who are privately insured, received twice the amount in federal grants than hospitals treating the uninsured or Medicaid patients.

HCA executives anticipating a strike in May, created “a new line of business focused on staffing strike-related labor shortages,” according to an email an HCA recruiter sent to the nurses obtained by the *Times*. Apparently, any nurse who would walk across the picket line would receive more than they did in their present job, possibly up to \$980 per shift to include a \$150 “show up” bonus and a small breakfast.

Nurses have continually pointed out that the hospital chain is using the pandemic and losses of company revenue as a pretext for cutting costs and further enriching its coffers. HCA has received \$700 million in bailout funds from the federal government and has amassed another \$4 billion in Medicare loans. Over the past decade, HCA has accumulated more than \$25 billion in profits.

While the growing opposition of nurses against HCA Healthcare is a welcome development, they cannot take forward their struggle if their fight remains in the hands of the SEIU and NNU. Both unions are aligned with the corporate-controlled Democratic Party and have repeatedly betrayed the struggles of nurses and other health care workers. Just last week, SEIU Local 1000 accepted an 11 percent pay cut demanded by California

Governor Gavin Newsom for 96,000 nurses, custodians and administrators employed by the state government.

If the SEIU is forced to call the strike, it will do everything to isolate the struggle and in the end it will accept management’s terms. Instead, workers should take the struggle into their own hands, by forming rank-and-file committees to demand full protective gear and equipment to combat the pandemic, full compensation to all staff, and no furloughing of workers. This must be combined with a political offensive by the whole working class to replace capitalist medicine with a socialized system of medicine based on human needs, not corporate profits.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact