

Riverside Community Hospital nurses strike in California

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Nurses in SEIU local 121 at the Riverside Community Hospital in California have gone on strike and plan to protest for 10 days until the HCA Healthcare hospital chain provides safety equipment for employees and resumes the staffing ratios agreed to last year.

Since the start of the pandemic, nurses at 19 HCA hospitals complained to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) that they lacked protective gear like respirator masks and were forced to reuse medical gowns. The *Guardian* and *Kaiser Health News* have identified 679 health care workers in the US who have died from COVID-19. Nurses at HCA have repeatedly complained about not being provided with safety equipment, medical technicians and cleaning staff. Executives threatened to lay off thousands of nurses if they didn't agree to wage freezes and other cuts.

A nurse at an HCA hospital in Kansas City, Missouri, Celia Yap-B, died from COVID-19 in April, a month after her coworkers complained to OSHA that she had to treat a patient without safety gear. At HCA's hospital in Riverside, California, Rosa Luna died after cleaning patient rooms and contracting the virus. Her colleagues warned executives in emails that hospital cleaning staff were not being provided with safety masks.

Now, with California and states across the country lifting social distancing measures, COVID-19 cases are skyrocketing. Riverside itself is a hotspot, with the second largest number of cases and deaths in California. On Friday, Riverside County confirmed 501 new COVID cases. It has been responsible for roughly 10 percent of new cases across the state over the past two weeks. The efforts of nurses and hospital staff to brace for this storm have been undermined by HCA's

cost-cutting.

With a wave of new cases developing and available ICU beds across the county dropping to just 86, HCA executives have threatened to lay off 10 percent of the workers unless the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and National Nurses United accept wage freezes, the elimination of company contributions to workers' pensions and other cuts.

Rather than call a system-wide strike in response to this threat against all of its members at HCA hospitals, the SEIU has called an isolated action, limited to the Riverside facility. SEIU Local 121 alone has members at two other HCA hospitals nearby. The isolated character of the work stoppage in Riverside allows HCA to bring in strike-breakers without significant expense.

Already, the hospital has brought in at least 400 nurses from other hospitals to offset the strike. HCA Healthcare recently offered nurses who cross the picket line up to \$980 per shift, a \$150 "show up" bonus and a continental breakfast.

Demonstrating the incapacity of privately-owned health care to respond with anything but greed to the pandemic, HCA received almost \$1 billion in bailout funds set aside for the hospital industry by the federal government, part of the economic stimulus package misnamed the CARES Act. Many hospital chains continue to lay off or cut the pay of workers while compensating their executives with millions. Collectively, the hospital chains are sitting on billions of dollars of cash reserves. HCA earned more than \$7 billion in profits over the last two years and its CEO made \$26 million in 2019. The company is worth \$36 billion.

The CEO at HCA, Samuel Hazen, has responded to criticisms of penny-pinching by donating two months'

salary toward a fund to help furloughed workers. This amounts to \$237,000, less than 1 percent of his \$26 million annual pay.

Erin McIntosh, a nurse and member of SEIU Local 121RN, told the *Guardian*: “When the pandemic hit, I thought HCA, our hospital, would be revving up the resources, that we would have more resources, more staff. But unfortunately it was the opposite. They started making cuts, and we’re working with skeleton crews. We’re being cut to the bare minimum.”

The union and the hospital reached an agreement last year that capped the number of patients per nurse. The number ranges from two to five patients. That agreement expired on May 31, forcing nurses to take on additional patients as well as other tasks such as housekeeping.

Although the Riverside Community Hospital has not laid off or furloughed any workers because of COVID-19, they have stopped calling in per diem nurses, who typically fill the schedule by working only one day a week. The hospital has also started a pandemic pay program, which pays nurses 70 percent of their regular pay for hours not worked. However, it requires them to be on call.

The SEIU intends to end the walkout after 10 days, whether or not its conditions are met. Nurses looking to protect their patients and themselves must reject the straitjacket being imposed by the union bureaucracy. Just last week, SEIU Local 1,000 accepted an 11 percent pay cut demanded by California’s Democratic governor, Gavin Newsom, affecting 96,000 nurses, custodians and administrators employed by the state.

To carry the fight forward, nurses should take the struggle into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to demand full protective gear and equipment, full compensation for all staff and no furloughing of workers. This must be combined with a political fight to unite all sections of workers in opposition to the corporations and the government, and demand the replacement of for-profit medicine with a socialized system to provide free, equal and high quality health care for all.



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