

Riverside, California: HCA nurses strike continues as coronavirus takes its toll

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Striking nurses in Riverside, California are entering into the ninth day of struggle against the HCA Healthcare subsidiary Riverside Community Hospital (RCH) as a part of a 10-day strike initiative amid rising anger over unsafe conditions and understaffing. Although the militancy of health care workers remains strong, there is a looming danger that the strike action will be betrayed by the union and end with an acceptance of management's terms under conditions where the coronavirus pandemic is ravaging the entire state of California.

An estimated 500 nurses have gone on strike each day throughout this past week outside RCH hospital grounds. Major demands of the nurses include adequate staffing to relieve nurses from working arduously long shifts and to address the chronic lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), which has resulted in at least one nurse at the hospital falling ill and dying from COVID-19 and 60 becoming infected. In many cases, nurses have been forced to work 12-hour shifts without taking breaks to eat food, drink water, or even go to the bathroom.

This is occurring even while hospitals across the state of California and the country are seeing an astronomical spike in COVID-19 cases and ICU bed availability suffers from critical shortages. Just yesterday, Riverside County reported more than 500 new cases of COVID-19 and two additional deaths. Riverside University Public Health System expects there to be 18,811 total cases in the county by next Tuesday. The spike in cases is a consequence of the reckless and premature back-to-work drive that has been spearheaded by the Trump administration and put into practice by Democratic California Governor Gavin Newsom.

According to health officials, the confirmed active case count in Riverside bloated to 10,059 on Thursday, compared to 9,532 on Wednesday. The number of deaths due to COVID-19 stands at 465. On Wednesday, Governor Newsom implemented a ban on indoor operations at restaurants, wineries, family entertainment centers and theaters. He cited this as a precautionary measure in response to the "particularly concerning" spike in infections for 19 counties within the state.

In Riverside, as well several counties on the state government's "watch list," multi-agency strike teams have been deployed to collaborate with local business owners to

enforce compliance with state and federal health protocols, including social distancing and mask usage. While mandates barring indoor activities are scheduled for three weeks, scientists and epidemiologists have noted that this is the beginning of a resurgence of the pandemic in multiple states across the country after lockdowns were lifted to resume economic activity.

According to hospital figures, on Thursday hospitalizations increased by 12 patients and ICU patients increased by 6 additional patients. In total, there are 431 patients currently being serviced at RCH and 123 patients in ICU. Hospitals across the county are now scrambling to prepare for the expected surge in capacity. Riverside spokeswoman Brooke Federico stated earlier this week that suspected and confirmed coronavirus patients currently account for about 35 percent of those beds.

Hospitals in Riverside County have already begun placing some overflow patients in surge-capacity beds on a temporary basis despite the county officially having 385 licensed ICU beds. The chief operating officer at Desert Regional Medical Center, Michael Ditoro, told local media that his facility has hit ICU-bed capacity "well prior to COVID. Year after year." But according to Ditoro, the surge in capacity isn't the biggest problem, and meager staffing levels are placing health care workers and patients at severe risk.

Alan Williamson, vice president of medical affairs and chief medical officer at Eisenhower Health, voiced concern over the severe crisis of overstaffing as confirmed COVID-19 cases ramp up. Eisenhower Health has the ability to accommodate 155 intensive-care patients but, as Williamson put it, "the question would be, 'are you able to muster enough nursing staff and ancillary staff to run 155 ICU beds?'"

Medical professionals and local politicians have sounded alarm bells over the dire situation facing hospitals in the Riverside area. Democratic Party Rep. Raul Ruiz, who is also a medical doctor, said in a public email, "I am calling on the county to immediately reverse their decision to rescind public health safety and reinstate their order to wear masks in public and to transparently communicate their social distancing and stay-at-home surge intervention plans."

Public health officials in the county have also expressed

worries over the recent upticks in coronavirus cases and hospitalizations. Earlier this week, Riverside's public health officer, Dr. Cameron Kaiser, told the Board of Supervisors that the county's progress in fighting the virus has vastly deteriorated and that the "curve is no longer flat."

In data produced by state officials, hospital conditions in Riverside have steadily worsened ever since reopening plans were put into effect. Towards the end of May, there were 195 patients across 15 hospitals in Riverside who were being treated for COVID-19. As of July 1, that number has more than doubled.

Striking HCA nurses speaking to local media in recent days have repeatedly pointed out how draconian the hospital regime has been in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic. Erik, an RN and rapid response team member, told MedPage Today, "You have to sneak the [water or lunch] break in, or you get to the end of the day and it dawns on you that you're dehydrated and you haven't been to the bathroom all day." RNs frequently go for 10 hours without bathroom breaks while wearing extremely tight respiratory masks, feeling incredibly dehydrated but unable to step away from patients due to short staffing.

Hospital management has enforced this practice in defiance of required break time-slots. According to nursing staff regulations at RCH, nurses are entitled to three paid 15-minute breaks and a half-hour off the clock each working day. "If I could find a single member who got all those breaks every day, I would keel over from shock because it doesn't happen," Andrew said.

In addition to the increased workload on the patient floor, nurses have been compelled to handle housekeeping duties. This has led to a significant drop in cleanliness in hospital rooms and unsanitary care. Nurses have been tasked with stripping beds, wiping poles and IVs, and stocking rooms. There have been cases of women in birth delivery units being brought into rooms that are still noticeably dirty from the last delivery.

A survey conducted by SEIU Local 121RN, which holds the contract for the HCA nurses, found that only 27 percent of HCA health care hospitals in the Southern California area have access to N95 respirators in their unit, significantly lower than other hospitals surveyed. Around the same number of nurses have access to Powered Air Purifying Respirators. Only half of HCA hospital nursing staff have been trained in safely donning and doffing PPE in the past year. Staff confidence in the hospital management's ability to address safety equipment shortages is also abysmally low. The survey showed that only 3 percent of HCA health care workers felt their facility had enough PPE for expected coronavirus increases.

While the SEIU has consistently declared that the temporary strike has been carried out to ensure "worker safety," and supposedly place pressure on RCH to address the needs of workers, all actions of the union point to a strategy of strangling the rising upsurge and making sure it does not

endanger the profit interests of the company. SEIU is doing everything in its power to suppress the continual upsurge of nurse opposition and derail the strike wave into a dead end.

The 10-day strike is set to end on Monday without any clear resolution on the deplorable working environment and shortage of staffing nurses are facing across the California hospital system. No information is being relayed to health care workers or the public at large about what is being communicated or planned between the union and Riverside Community Hospital management. RCH, in an attempt to safeguard itself with staff absent, has hired extra nursing staff to act as strikebreakers to continue its operations.

Nothing is being said by the SEIU on the use of strikebreakers to handicap the struggle launched by health care workers or the obstinate refusal of RCH to fulfill workers' demands. On the contrary, union officials have insisted that the calling of the strike has nothing to do with allocating more resources and funding to address workers' concerns. Moreover, SEIU has also stated the walkout is not related to the current contract of workers at RCH, which doesn't expire until September.

SEIU has refused to pose any concrete demands to HCA Healthcare and no confidence should be placed in this pro-corporate union in the fight for improved working conditions, a livable wage, and to stop layoffs. Nurses at RCH should link up with health care, auto and factory workers across the country for a general strike and communicate with workers internationally who are facing the same struggle against multibillion-dollar corporations and the capitalist politicians and corrupt trade unions who protect them.

To carry out the necessary amount of mass testing, contact-tracing, and quarantine procedures needed to eradicate the pandemic and save lives, as well as ensure nurses, doctors and other critical frontline workers have adequate PPE to combat COVID-19, health care workers and hospital staff should form rank-and-file safety committees to guarantee that their social needs are met and are not subordinated to private profit.



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