

Four thousand University of Illinois at Chicago staff join striking nurses

Kristina Betinis, Marcus Day
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University of Illinois Hospital nurses, 800 of whom walked out on strike Saturday, were joined Monday by more than 4,000 University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) hospital and university staff, including parking attendants, cashiers, custodians, emergency medical technicians, laboratory animal caretakers and physical therapists.

Staff are on strike at UIC locations in Chicago, Peoria, Rockford and Urbana. The staff have been working without a contract for more than a year.

The staff, some of whom are paid less than \$9 an hour, are demanding pay raises and the most basic protections from the COVID-19 pandemic—personal protective equipment and testing. The university is exploiting a loophole that permits it to pay the state minimum wage and not the city of Chicago’s minimum wage of \$14 per hour, which is still virtually impossible to live on.

UIC Chancellor Michael Amiridis has declared the staff walkout “not in the best interest of the campus community.”

Thirteen hundred University of Illinois Hospital nurses, who are striking to demand lower nurse-to-patient ratios, better pay and personal protective equipment, planned to walk out on Saturday, but a Cook County judge ruled Friday that more than 500 nurses who work in critical care units had to remain on duty.

According to the university-health system joint statement, some university health staff were also prevented from striking by the judgment, including medical laboratory workers, transporters, respiratory therapists, mental health counselors and police telecommunications staff.

Michael Zenn, CEO of University of Illinois Hospital & Clinics, told local media that more than 600 nurses

and health care staff have been brought in as strikebreakers. Zenn also rejected the nurses’ demand for lower nurse-to-patient ratios. The Illinois Nurses Association (INA) announced it will limit the nurses’ strike to one week.

SEIU leaders announced the UIC staff strike was indefinite and would continue until an agreement is reached. On Saturday the union reported UIC has brought in strikebreakers from Mississippi, Nevada, Tennessee and Texas—all states with higher COVID-19 infection rates than Illinois. Local president Dian Palmer stated SEIU filed an unfair labor practice grievance with National Labor Relations Board. Negotiations are to resume today between UIC and the SEIU.

Workers on the UIC picket lines Monday chanted, “Poverty wages have to go.” The strikers elicited broad support, with bus drivers, truckers and passersby in cars continuously honking as they passed the pickets.

Carolyn, a worker in building services, told the WSWS that low wages were the most significant issue for her in the strike. “The pay is ridiculous to me, but I needed work bad, so I took the job.”

Carolyn had started at \$12.65 per hour and had received one 60 cent raise in the last year, still leaving her below the minimum wage. “They say it’s something about us working for a state job, they have a right to decide if we get that minimum wage. So of course we didn’t get it.” She added that she had not received any strike pay from SEIU.

The official response to the pandemic had been appalling, Carolyn said, and she thought schools should remain closed. “At least until they come up with something for COVID. If it was my child, I would’ve made them stay home, not attend. I’m looking at the news, too many people dying. Every time I look at it,

the percentage rate is going up, you have to quarantine if you go to a different state. So I'm all for closing."

She said she would support a national strike by workers for safe and decent working conditions. "That'd be good, a national strike. That's what we were saying before we got out here. I think the more, the better. All the workers should get together."

Although students who spoke to the WSWS hadn't heard much about the strike, they quickly expressed their support once the issues were explained. "This is a crisis, it's a serious issue," Sean, a computer science major, said. "The nurses and students are all struggling with this." He said the striking workers "are doing the right thing, and I think they deserve all the support that we can give them."

One must ask, how can thousands of workers in the third-largest city in the United States be working—some for less than the minimum wage—all for inadequate pay, under unsafe conditions without sufficient personal protective equipment and risking their lives? Answering this question requires examining the basic political framework of the strike and contrasting it to the reality of the extremely dangerous conditions workers and students are facing.

The nurses and staff are striking against the Democratic leadership at the highest levels of the state, who are committed to reopening the economy in pursuit of profits at the cost of human lives. At the same time, Democratic representatives of the state and local government appeared at the rally and published statements on social media declaring their general support for the strike in pleading tones.

At a noon rally on Monday, Rainbow/PUSH Coalition's Jesse Jackson led a prayer: "I am somebody. Respect me. Protect me."

Promoting racial and ethnic politics, Chicago Teachers Union Vice President Stacy Davis Gates declared, "If Black lives mattered, you would have a contract. If Latinx lives mattered, you would have a contract. If Filipino lives mattered, you would have a contract." As if workers' contracts are decided based on their race or ethnicity.

Democratic alderman Carlos Ramirez Rosa, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, tweeted, "It's up to @UIHealth and @thisisUIC to do right by their workers. I stand with the workers in their demand for fair contracts."

One would never guess from these statements the deadly seriousness of the situation and the determination of the workers. There is a great deal of nervousness on the part of the ruling class and its Democratic Party lieutenants over the mass support enjoyed by 5,000 workers striking for life and health in Chicago.

This is because the University of Illinois workers strike is part of the struggle of the entire working class against the policies of the ruling class in response to the pandemic. The strike by nurses and staff must be deepened and expanded to all sections of workers who are being pressed into work to risk their lives and health and those of the broader community, like the striking grad students at University of Michigan and students and staff engaging in sickouts at the two large campuses in Iowa.

The pandemic has worsened every index of social misery in the United States and around the world. A recent survey found that more than half of Chicago households reported facing serious financial problems, including job and wage loss, during the coronavirus pandemic, that half had serious problems caring for children and more than one-third report having used up all their savings, for those that had any.

Workers' struggle for their lives and health must be expanded beyond the university and beyond Illinois. Nurses and staff at the University of Illinois can take the fight into their own hands and join the growing movement of workers building rank-and-file committees that are uniting for a nationwide general strike.



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