

“We’re going to keep fighting”

Opposition mounts as thousands of University of Illinois at Chicago nurses and workers continue strike

Kylie Rose
17 September 2020

Thousands of workers at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) continued into day three of their strike Wednesday, joining more than 800 University of Illinois (UI) Hospital nurses, who have been on strike since Saturday.

The university has refused to meet the strikers’ basic demands. Workers are calling for higher wages, better staffing, improvements on workload and time off, and personal protective equipment (PPE) like N95 masks for all health care workers and hospital staff. Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73 is negotiating the contracts for 4,000 maintenance, clerical, professional, technical and service workers at the university.

What is happening on UIC’s campus and at the UI Hospital is part of a broader upsurge of the class struggle. Graduate students at the University of Michigan struck for over a week against their university’s reckless reopening of in-person classes, with a sellout agreement only forced through last night under threats of court injunctions and through the efforts of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) union, which intervened over the last deal to scuttle the strike.

There have also been significant protests by students at Iowa State University, the University of Iowa, San Diego State University, the University of California at San Diego, the University of Wisconsin and other universities in recent weeks, along with growing anger among teachers at public schools around the country.

In an indication of the ongoing fear within ruling circles over the possibility of the struggles at UIC and

UI Hospital triggering an explosion of pent-up social opposition in the run-up to the US elections, the corporate media continued its effective blackout of the strikes Wednesday, with neither the Chicago nor the national press carrying coverage of the walkouts over the last two days.

Many workers at UIC are outraged by the contempt with which the university administration treats them. The university has claimed that it is bound only by Illinois’ minimum wage of \$8.75, instead of Chicago’s \$14 minimum.

Grace, a UI health nurse, told the *World Socialist Web Site* on the picket lines Wednesday, “There’s definitely enough money to meet our demands. We have people making just a little bit more than minimum wage, and that’s not fair. We’re out here dealing with COVID-19 every day. We have had over 200 nurses infected and four died.” A veteran nurse chimed in to add that two truck drivers had also died since the pandemic began.

While many campus workers are making less than it costs to live in the area, the president of the University of Illinois system, Timothy Killeen, was handed a 40 percent pay raise by the board of trustees at the beginning of the year, boosting his annual salary to \$835,000.

“The university president got a 40 percent raise, but where’s our raise? That’s not fair, we got nothing and there’s 40 percent for one person?” one service worker at the picket lines demanded.

Another worker added, “The Republicans and Democrats control a lot of money. But we’re the

workers, we're the ones who are doing the job. They're getting bonuses, and we're getting nothing. That's why we need to get out here all together."

Since the onset of the pandemic, workers at UIC have had to fight for basic PPE for themselves. Now they're forced to continue the same struggle for students as well. A clerical worker said, "We have had to fight to get them the proper protective equipment."

Both nurses and service workers said they believed that a nationwide strike of workers and students against the deadly conditions in workplaces and schools would have a great impact. "It definitely would be stronger if we did," the nurses said. A service worker said, "It would be great to get the point across. When you talk about the whole country getting involved, that's everybody from everywhere."

The university administration—and behind them, the Democratic Party, which dominates its board of trustees—are increasingly nervous over the support striking workers have elicited, and the real possibility of their struggle intersecting with the opposition building up among students. On Wednesday, UIC and the UI Hospital administration sent a dishonest and manipulative email to students, attempting to present their wage increase offers as reasonable, while saying nothing about their reckless nurse-to-patient ratios and understaffing at the hospital, nor the abominably low level of wages that are actually paid to university and hospital workers—in some cases, less than fast food workers make in Chicago.

The unsafe and inhumane working conditions being fought against at UIC are not solely the result of the callousness of UIC's management, but are rather the consequence of a deliberate policy by the ruling class to reopen workplaces and schools in the midst of an out-of-control pandemic in order to ensure the exploitation of the working class for profit continues. While spearheaded by the Trump administration, this policy has been supported in all essentials by both the Democrats and Republicans at the federal, state and local level.

Workers can and must combat the university's blatant disregard for workers' and students' lives, but they must do so separate from the corporate-controlled trade unions, which have overseen the deterioration of wages and working conditions to their present abysmal state.

To carry the struggle forward, striking nurses and workers must form rank-and-file committees to successfully wage a fight for safe and humane working conditions. An appeal must be made to the broadest sections of workers—autoworkers, health care workers, teachers and others—along with students to mobilize in opposition to the ruling class's murderous policies.

Contact the WSWs to discuss organizing a rank-and-file committee or to share your story.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact