

Union shuts down nurses strike at University of Illinois Hospital in Chicago

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On Friday, the Illinois Nurses Association ended a limited week-long strike of 800 nurses at the University of Illinois Hospital, isolating 4,000 staffers on the picket line. The limited strike ended without a new contract agreement, after the INA and the UIH hospital administration met for negotiations on Thursday.

The university staffers, including cashiers, custodians, parking attendants, laboratory animal caretakers, emergency medical technicians and physical therapists in the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73, joined the striking nurses on Monday after overwhelming sentiment for a combined struggle forced the SEIU's hand.

“The reason we’re on strike is because we want more money, we’re understaffed, we’re not treated with respect, we don’t have any [personal protective equipment] gear—no masks, gowns, or gloves,” Andre, a hospital worker, said. ‘Management puts more work on us. We are overworked. We don’t get vacation time as wanted because we are short-staffed on workers. We are denied vacation requests, we are denied our furlough days because we are understaffed. They want you to work your shift, and then they want you to turn around and work another shift because the person that was supposed to come in called off work. Now they get mad at you because you don’t want to stay and work because you still have a life outside of the hospital, and they try to retaliate by denying your vacation requests when they do have enough workers.’”

UIC staff are striking at locations in Chicago, Peoria, Rockford and Urbana. Workers have been without a contract for over a year. The staff, some of whom are paid less than \$9 an hour due to a loophole which allows UIC to not pay staff Chicago’s minimum wage of \$14 per hour, are demanding increased pay and personal protective equipment (PPE) and expanded

COVID-19 testing.

SEIU has stated that the UIC staff strike will continue indefinitely until an agreement is reached. This likely may be very soon. The union reported that UIC management is bringing in strikebreakers from Mississippi, Nevada, Tennessee and Texas.

The conditions which nurses and staffers face are the outcome of decades of attacks on jobs and living standards, overseen not only by UIC management but by the Democratic Party, which has controlled politics in Illinois and Chicago for a century.

The ruling class is relying on the unions nationwide to rein in a growing strike wave in response to the pandemic. Last week, University of Michigan graduate student workers struck for over a week against their university’s reckless and dangerous drive to have in-person classes only to end with a sellout agreement after the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) union intervened to end the strike.

Almost one year ago, the leadership of SEIU Local 73 worked closely with the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and its parent union AFT to smother the Chicago teachers’ strike.

Today, SEIU 73 is seeking to isolate the strike by UIC staff by keeping 25,000 of their members on the job. During its one-week strike, the INA kept healthcare workers at different hospitals on the job in spite of similar conditions.

UIC workers are on strike without a penny in strike pay. Meanwhile, according to illinoissunshine.org, the SEIU nationally had \$430 million in assets as of 2019, \$150 million of which was in cash. SEIU donated more \$3 millions to Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle in her failed mayoral bid against current Chicago mayor Lori Lightfoot. In other words: millions for Democrats and union bureaucrats, and nothing for

workers.

Workers must move fast. The only way for workers to combat poverty wages and unsafe working conditions is to take the struggle out of the hands of the INA and SEIU by forming rank-and-file strike committees. They should break the union-imposed isolation of their struggle and issue an appeal to workers in Chicago and throughout the region to expand the strike.

The stranglehold of the financial aristocracy over education, healthcare and the political system is responsible for the conditions workers face, and it must be smashed. A mass political movement of the working class, which the Socialist Equality Party is fighting to build, must place the hospitals and universities under public, democratic control, ensuring they're run to meet the needs of workers.

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



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