

# Strike by 4,000 service workers at University of Illinois at Chicago enters its second week

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The strike by 4,000 University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) service workers is entering into its second week. Workers' main demands include personal protective equipment (PPE) and more protection from the COVID-19 pandemic. At least 300 UIC workers have been infected with COVID-19 and two have died.

Workers are also demanding a substantial wage increase. Many UIC workers are classified as workers of the state of Illinois, a loophole that allows them to be paid substantially less than Chicago's minimum wage. The fight is bringing workers into direct conflict with major figures in the Democratic party and the Illinois financial elite, who dominate the University's board.

The unions are working lockstep with management, the political establishment and the media, which has subjected the strike to a news blackout, to isolate the strike and pave the way for a sellout. The strike continues after the Illinois Nurses Association ended a seven day strike by 800 UIC Hospital nurses without a new contract, forcing them to cross the picket lines against hospital staffers. Meanwhile, SEIU Local 73 is keeping its 25,000 other members on the job.

To oppose the sellout which is being prepared behind their backs, striking hospital workers must follow the examples of auto workers and educators and organize themselves independently by forming rank-and-file committees. These committees would break the isolation of the strike, seeking the broadest possible mobilization of workers throughout Chicago and healthcare workers around the world in support the strike. They must also demand adequate time to study any contract proposal and that the voting process be monitored by representatives from the rank-and-file.

The WSWs also encourages UIC nurses and service workers to attend this Saturday's online forum, "What 'Herd immunity' means for educators and students," sponsored by the WSWs Educators Newsletter, and to

appeal to teachers throughout the world attending the meeting for support.

"The most important thing to me," a worker on the picket line told the *World Socialist Web Site* on Tuesday, "is that we have workers that are not making city minimum wage. We all live in a city and have to pay Chicago taxes, rent, mortgage. There are some people here making \$12 an hour while Chicago's minimum wage is \$14. That's the reason why I got involved in the strike. I have a higher wage, so I'm okay. I make more than \$20 an hour in the professional unit. But I'm not comfortable knowing that I have colleagues that are having a hard time."

"I have a daughter in college, a son in high school. So, it would be nice to get paid more. I've been in higher education for 10 years, at other universities. What pushed me to walk out was not just for me, it was for other people.

"Walking the picket line, I can tell you a lot of people aren't given proper masks, they are overworked and underpaid. Many of them get their shifts changed at the last minute, and they have kids. On top of our low wages, this creates a snowball effect on our lives. It starts with one thing and then keeps adding on. On top of everything, we have COVID-19 spreading! It's a breaking point. Enough is enough.

"Personally, I was blessed with going virtual and working from home [during the pandemic]. But other workers here are not in that good of a situation. They have to come in as essential workers. That's why having the proper PPE is needed."

"The number of cases were pretty high here. And then you end up taking it home too. It's not just you getting exposed and quarantining yourself in a hotel. First of all, you don't have the money for a hotel for two weeks. So you gotta go home—and that means exposing your husband, father, wife, kids, grandparents. They might be

sick and you have to take care of them.”

“I think the government should have been more on top [of things] before it hit and exploded in March. I really think before March, they knew the situation was coming down the line.”

The worker criticized the decision by the Illinois Nurses Association to end their own strike without a contract, forcing their members to cross the picket line against the hospital staffers. “It was a bad move to say when they were going to go back. What I do know is they went back and they’re still in the same situation. They still don’t have proper PPE. They’re still overworked and understaffed.”

Negotiations between the SEIU and management are continuing, though the union is keeping workers in the dark about the status of the talks. As far wages are concerned, SEIU is publicly calling only for a \$15 minimum wage—which will become Chicago’s minimum next year. Although \$15 per hour was never a livable wage since the union formed the “Fight for \$15” in 2012, inflation has further eroded the value of \$15 per hour. Fifteen dollars in 2012 dollars was worth \$16.70 in 2019.

SEIU members received no strike pay for the first week, and "eligible" workers will now only receive a paltry \$250 per week up to a maximum of \$550. The is in spite of the fact that the SEIU controls more than \$430 million in assets. SEIU president Mary Kay Henry's declared income was \$296,549 in 2015.

The union has also opened up its workers' dues money to the Democratic Party, which played the leading role in the rise of the "gig economy" and low-wage employment under Obama after the 2009 recession. According to OpenSecrets.org SEIU has given \$13,493,716 in direct political contributions to figures such as Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Vice Presidential candidate Kamala Harris. The union has also spent \$815,720 lobbying members of congress and \$5,212,281 on independent advertising, virtually all in support of Democrats.



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