

Alameda County hospital strike in California ends without contract

David Brown, Evan Winters
11 October 2020

The five-day strike at Northern California's Alameda Health System (AHS) ended on Sunday as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) returned to the negotiating table without a new contract. Over 3,000 SEIU workers at Highland Hospital in Oakland were joined by hundreds of nurses at San Leandro and Alameda hospitals in the strike over chronic understaffing, lack of personal protective equipment for the ongoing pandemic and management demands for wage freezes and other cuts to compensation.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers at Highland Hospital about their conditions and the broader political issues facing the working class. Michelle, a worker with over 10 years who works in education at the hospital, said, "This is a public service but isn't being publicly funded. Instead we have a top-heavy C-suite that cuts and cuts."

AHS is a public service that was spun off from Alameda County in the 1990s to be run without public funding by a nonprofit organization. Unable to bring in enough revenue treating the public in the increasingly impoverished neighborhoods of the East Bay, AHS has consistently sought to balance its budget with cuts to staffing and compensation.

Eva, a midwife, explained the sacrifices that health care workers are already making due to insufficient staffing, "Most of us do work from home that's unpaid, but if that doesn't happen, people's lives are at stake."

"Part of what we're fighting to fix," Michelle added, "are problems that existed prior to COVID. You can't take things from people when they aren't getting by on what they have."

"The for-profit system causes these problems," she continued. "I don't know why health care and education need to be a business. We haven't yet claimed our power as workers. By the time this

pandemic is over, I would like to see workers in charge of the health care system. The system doesn't work without every single one of us."

The SEIU has been calling for the Alameda County Board of Supervisors to resume direct control of AHS. The union claims the county government will be more likely to fund health care, but the reason county officials turned AHS over to a private company was to cut costs. The same efforts to minimize expenditures has already hit other county health services.

Earlier this month, Alameda County paramedics in the National Association of Government Employees (NAGE) protested wages that were 15 to 20 percent less than that paid for the same work by neighboring counties. Months of contract negotiations went nowhere. As is standard, none of the unions has called for a joint strike to force the government to fund health care. Instead they work with management to keep each section of workers trapped within the framework of local contract negotiations.

Antoine, a housekeeper at Highland, described broad anger over government policies. "There's so many ways to solve our problems. If the government wanted to, they could find the money for health care. They went in their backyard and pulled a few trillion from under the doghouse to support the stock market with this pandemic, but they act like there's nothing for health care. People are upset how the government is treating us and how the company is treating us."

Like many hospital staff, Antoine grew up in Oakland and has seen the steady rise in homelessness that has intensified since the 2008 economic crisis. As a public hospital, the conditions inside Highland Hospital's emergency room express the social crisis across Oakland.

"It can take a lot out of you to work here," Antoine

explained. “We’re a public service. We don’t turn away people without insurance, and we get people facing a lot of trouble outside their routine health. There was one night I was working where we had 22 gunshot wounds come in. Four of them died. I had to clean up the blood of someone I knew. Some days you go home, and it takes a while to put it behind.”

The economic impact of the pandemic intensifies the systemic problems health care workers face. “Sometimes the system is set up to fail,” Antoine continued. “With the COVID-19 pandemic we were hit very hard. At Highland Hospital we have a lot of at-risk employees. Now the state is talking about opening up schools, which will make it worse. But they need to drop the class size. Headcount shouldn’t be any more than 17. There’s no way you can open schools back up in a pandemic while cramming 30 kids into a class.”

Michelle summarized the political decision of the US government to let the coronavirus spread across the United States. “There are more COVID cases in the White House than New Zealand.”

To take forward their fight, nurses and other health care workers will have to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by setting up rank-and-file committees independent of the SEIU and other unions. The SEIU is promoting Biden and the Democrats, who are just as committed to for-profit medicine as Trump and the Republicans. That is why the industrial mobilization of the working class must be combined with a political struggle against both corporate-controlled parties and for socialism.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact