

Nursing home workers take strike action in Detroit suburb

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21 October 2020

Approximately sixty workers at Four Seasons Rehabilitation and Nursing in the Detroit suburb of Westland, Michigan went on strike Monday morning over dangerous conditions in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The workers are fighting poverty-level wages, unsafe patient-to-staff ratios and inadequate health and safety protocols.

The workers began picketing at 6:00 a.m. at the Four Seasons, which has about 200 residents and is owned by Charles A. Dunn. Dunn also owns 11 other long-term care facilities in the Detroit area. The striking workers reported that the families of Four Seasons residents expressed support for the walkout and that people who live in the neighborhood brought food to the picket lines.

One striking worker told the WWSW, “The support in the community has been great, I’m not kidding. There was a lady that stopped traffic to support us and offer us food for the picket line. There have been people from other counties coming by just to support us.”

Another nursing home employee explained why the workers are striking. “We are fed up. We have been short staffed,” she said, adding, “But we love our patients.” Due to the short staffing, it is not unusual for workers to be forced to work four or eight hours longer than their scheduled shifts.

Another striker said, “They need to hire at least 10-15 people. There should be three to four staff per unit in the mornings and we only have two. They have not hired anyone. I work eighty hours a week.”

The Four Seasons workers are being forced by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) to fight alone even though some 1,600 workers at for-profit nursing home chains and other nonaffiliated facilities in the metropolitan Detroit area are facing the exact same struggle.

When the contracts for eighteen Detroit area nursing homes expired on August 11, the SEIU continued negotiations even though there was overwhelming support among workers for strike action. After Ciena Healthcare, which owns 38 nursing home facilities in Michigan, obtained a temporary restraining order against a strike from Oakland County Circuit Court, the SEIU ceded to the demands of Democratic Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer that the union and employers prevent a walkout and continue talks for 30 days.

On October 9, the Detroit area nursing home workers voted for strike action beginning October 19 to take forward their demands. However, the SEIU then proceeded to conclude separate sweetheart deals—which include wages of less than \$15 per hour—with the management at all the other nursing homes. This has left the staff at Four Seasons to fight alone.

As one of the strikers explained, anger among the workers kept growing as they labored without any new contract. “For three years we’ve had no raise, for two years we’ve had no contract. They do not provide a safe environment. The working conditions are awful. Like last Saturday, there was only one [staff member] to nineteen residents. I work in the behavior unit and it’s not safe for them or me. But management doesn’t care.”

Conditions in nursing homes across Michigan are horrific. To date, there have been 9,070 confirmed cases of coronavirus at Michigan nursing homes and 2,170 deaths. There have been 5,322 confirmed cases among staff and 22 deaths. According to the state of Michigan coronavirus website, Four Seasons has reported eight cases of COVID-19 and five deaths as well as 22 staff who have contracted the virus.

The Four Seasons employee said, “There are

residents and staff that have had the virus. But at the beginning, the facility did not provide enough PPE [personal protective equipment] for everybody. We had one N95 mask per person. And sometimes that one mask has to last for weeks. They would not replace it until it was raggedy.

“We treat our residents as family. We make sure they are protected. We don’t get enough PPE, but even still we have been able to minimize COVID by following protocol. Management did not properly enforce these protocols, however.

“They are getting extra money from the government to give to workers [from the CARES Act]. It’s not for them to put in their pocket. We are risking our own lives and our own families to make sure other peoples’ families are taken care of.

“They are giving an extra \$2 per hour out of this for every CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant) and nurse, but not dietary, cleaning or activities workers. Everybody else isn’t getting it. How is that fair? And they are all working in the same facilities!”

Only a small fraction of the approximately 120,000 workers in long-term care in Michigan—those working directly for the state or companies in the Medicaid-funded programs—received the \$2-per-hour raise that Governor Whitmer put into effect between July 1 and September 30 as part of the response to the coronavirus.

In addition to isolating the strike at Four Seasons, the SEIU and Democratic Party have attempted to make the fight for increased wages and safe working conditions during the pandemic into a race issue because the majority of the employees are African American women.

An SEIU representative reported that one of the nursing home managers referred to the workers as “hood rats” and, after the workers walked out, said, “I see where you all live, you will be back.”

While management certainly would like to stir up racial antagonisms, the nursing home workers are engaged in a class struggle, the same as every other section of the working class, regardless of race or nationality.

In discussing the walkout by autoworkers at the beginning of the pandemic, one worker said: “They are fighting for our rights, we are fighting for theirs. I believe every worker has the right to be heard. You cannot treat us like this. This isn’t a race issue. But the

majority of the workers here happen to be African American and other minorities. To call us ‘hood rats’ is just disrespectful.”

Democratic Party US Representative Rashida Tlaib made an appearance at the picket line on Monday and also brought up the issue in a subsequent tweet: “The intimidation & racially-charged bullying is disgusting & must stop. Workers deserve a contract.” Rather than aiding the struggle, Tlaib is seeking to boost the credibility of the SEIU and conceal the complicity of the Democratic Party with Trump’s “herd immunity” policy, which has already led to over 225,000 COVID deaths, 42 percent of which have occurred in nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

It is noteworthy that New York’s Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo earlier this year signed legislation shielding hospital and nursing home executives from the threat of lawsuits stemming from the pandemic.

The Democrats and the SEIU are working together to contain the struggle of nursing home workers and prevent it from uniting more broadly with workers and young people facing desperate economic and social circumstances sparked by the coronavirus and the government’s response to it.

Nursing home workers must organize independently of both the unions and the Democratic Party, which have collaborated for decades with the nursing home, health care and insurance industries against the needs of the working class. The fight for the basic rights to decent wages, safe working conditions and good health care services for the elderly can be carried forward only through the establishment of rank-and-file workplace committees to expand the strike throughout the metro Detroit area and mobilize broader sections of the working class.



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