

Illinois nursing home workers strike in second week as pandemic surges: Build rank-and-file-committees to save lives

Jessica Goldstein, Kristina Betinis
3 December 2020

Wednesday concluded the tenth day of a strike by nearly 700 Chicago-area nursing home workers at 11 of 13 facilities operated by Illinois-based Infinity Healthcare Management. On the same day, Illinois Department of Public Health reported a record 238 COVID-19 deaths, far surpassing the May record of 191 deaths. In the communities where the strikes are ongoing, solidarity with the striking workers is on display as cars honk in support of the strike as they pass the picket lines.

Certified nursing assistants (CNAs), laundry workers, dietary assistants, housekeepers and other critical workers are on strike for hazard pay, higher wages, adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) and increased staff to meet patient needs during the pandemic.

Infinity's City View Multicare Center in Cicero is reported to have the highest number of COVID-19 cases in the state this week. The company's Niles Nursing & Rehabilitation Center has seen the largest number of deaths from the virus.

Nursing home workers are fighting to save their lives and the lives of their patients as the coronavirus continues its rampant spread through long-term care facilities in the state. As of November 27, the Illinois Department of Public Health has reported 45,882 reported cases at long-term care facilities and 6,047 deaths, nearly half of the total deaths from the virus in the state since the beginning of the pandemic.

Workers are rightly angered that Infinity Healthcare received \$12.7 million in Federal CARES Act bailout funds while it claims to have no money to meet their demands. Infinity management is offering only a \$15.15 starting wage for new CNAs, a \$0.25 per hour raise for those making above that, and a yearly raise of only \$0.10 per hour, according to Shaba Andrich, the Service Employee International Union's vice president for

nursing homes.

The contract terms proposed by SEIU Healthcare Illinois-Indiana threaten poverty for the striking nursing home workers. Workers are currently paid about \$13 per hour and are demanding raises of \$2 per hour, bringing CNAs up to a starting pay of \$15.50. Pay for non-CNA workers would rise to \$14.50 outside of Chicago and \$15 at facilities located in Chicago. These "raises" are barely above or at Chicago's minimum wage, which is set to rise to \$15 in 2021.

The deeply exploitative conditions in nursing facilities are a direct result of profit seeking in health care. Infinity, run by Moishe Gubin and Michael Blisko, manages health care facilities in Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee and Arkansas. In recent years, the *Chicago Tribune* investigated widespread narcotics use, patient injury and deaths in Infinity-managed facilities in Chicago and referred to its "complex ownership and management structures." Gubin also operates a separate company, Strawberry Fields Real Estate Investment Trust, whose subsidiaries own the real estate in which Infinity operates.

In April, Illinois Democratic Gov. J.B. Pritzker and New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed executive orders shielding nursing homes from civil liability related to the pandemic. This has had the result of loosening restrictions and worsening conditions in the industry, protecting the most negligent operators from suit under the guise of COVID-19. Senate Republicans took up Cuomo's order in their effort to produce federal legislation to protect business interests.

Under these conditions, SEIU's cozy relationship with the Democratic Party stands ever more thoroughly exposed. The *World Socialist Web Site* warned at the beginning of the strike that the SEIU will do everything in its power to the sabotage workers' struggles while

posturing as fighting in the workers' best interest against the corporations.

SEIU has a well-worn pattern of negotiating with management behind closed doors to push through sellout contracts, as in the strike of 4,000 service workers at University of Illinois at Chicago in early October.

SEIU has also promised nursing home workers that they will receive strike pay, according to its website. But striking nursing home workers should be wary of this promise. The strike pay which was promised to UIC service workers came with many caveats. Workers commented on the Facebook page #StrikeForOurLivesUIC after the strike with complaints that they had been denied the paltry sums from the bogus "hardship fund," which, according to its website, provided "eligible workers" up to "a maximum of \$250 per week and \$550 in total or until all funds have been disbursed." Workers could not even apply for these benefits until September 28, more than a week after the strike had begun.

After UIC service workers were forced back on the job, they complained SEIU was keeping them in the dark about the negotiated raises, retroactive pay and possible hazard pay as late as the second week of November. At the same time, workers reported not being allowed to stay home from work, or work from home under conditions of a surge of COVID-19 cases in Illinois and a statewide stay-at-home advisory.

The SEIU accepts the domination of the health care industry by private profit and will do nothing to make conditions safer or guarantee workers' wages above poverty level.

SEIU Healthcare IL-IN posted a quote from Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker to its Facebook page yesterday: "There are hundreds of SEIU nursing home workers on strike who are asking for the same type of reasonable working conditions that a large number of long-term care facilities around Illinois have already agreed to in their own contracts."

Pritzker, who is personally worth \$3.4 billion, declared the demands put forth by the SEIU "reasonable" after shielding deeply corrupt and exploitative corporations like Infinity from legal liability.

The "reasonable" conditions are the poverty wages, unsafe conditions and understaffed nursing homes that workers at over 100 other long-term care facilities in Illinois risk their lives to work in. Many of these contracts were also negotiated by the SEIU, including those pushed through in May of this year after the union blocked a

strike of nearly 10,000 nursing home workers at 64 facilities across the state.

SEIU is also isolating the Infinity nursing home workers from the other workers it has betrayed across the state and the country who are facing the same conditions that they fought against as a result of the union's sellout negotiations. Just days ago, over 800 nurses walked out on strike in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Health care workers have entered into struggle in Germany, Australia, Brazil, Zimbabwe and other countries around the world, where they are forced to work in deadly conditions for the profit interests of the global ruling elite.

Nursing home workers should elect independent rank-and-file safety committees to raise their own demands based on what they and their patients need, not what profit-seeking business people deem "reasonable." This requires workers to break with the politics of the SEIU and the Democratic Party.

Nursing home workers can take the lead established by auto workers and teachers in forming rank-and-file committees, independent of the SEIU, in order to wage a fight for decent pay, safe and humane working conditions, and the resources necessary to provide dignified care to the elderly and those with long-term care needs.

The SEP and WSWS will do everything possible to assist Infinity workers in the organization of rank-and-file committees and formation of connections with other sections of workers—in health care, auto manufacturing, public education, logistics and elsewhere—to launch a common struggle for workers' rights. We urge nursing home workers to contact us today.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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