

SEIU Healthcare reaches tentative agreement with management in Illinois nursing home strike

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On Friday, leaders of SEIU Healthcare Illinois Indiana announced they had reached tentative agreement (TA) to end a 12-day strike by nearly 700 workers at 11 of 13 long term-care facilities owned by Infinity Healthcare Management. With the SEIU abandoning the demand for pay parity with other long-term care facilities (LTCFs) around the state, the agreement is a major victory for Infinity. Infinity received \$12.7 million in Federal CARES Act bailout funds earlier this year, but claims it cannot pay wages and provide adequate personal protective equipment.

Workers are being called back into Infinity facilities beginning today amid the explosion in COVID-19 cases in LTCFs. In recent days, Infinity's City View Multicare Center in Cicero, just outside of Chicago, was reported to have the highest number of COVID-19 cases in the state. There have been at least 100 additional cases reported across Infinity's LTCFs in Illinois, bringing the total beyond 1,500 for the year. Eleven of the company's 13 facilities are listed as currently having open outbreaks. Since the strike began, the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) registered an additional 745 deaths in LTCFs across the state.

The tentative agreement is also a success for SEIU, which once again proved its value to management in keeping down wage demands and tamping down social anger. But this will not remain the case for long. The workers who risk their lives to work in LTCFs for poverty wages must continue the fight and reject this sellout of their struggle.

In its summary of the agreement, SEIU claims workers will receive an average increase of \$2 per hour, but for some the increase will be as low as just \$1 per

hour in base wages. Further, a newly introduced wage scale enshrines starting pay as low as \$11.10 per hour for housekeepers, maintenance workers and other job titles in suburban and downstate facilities. This is just 10 cents per hour higher than the Illinois minimum wage.

Even the \$12.10 per hour pay for new hires in Cook County is just 10 cents per hour higher than the county's current minimum wage. Based on the wage scale in the TA summary, it appears possible that starting pay will even fall below the state minimum in the third year of the contract. The state minimum wage is set to rise to \$13 per hour in 2023.

Only certified nursing assistants (CNAs) and rehabilitation aides will make \$15.50 to start, with other job titles earning between \$14 and \$14.50 per hour. This is even lower than the insultingly low pay raises SEIU negotiated earlier this year with 64 facilities represented by the Illinois Association of Health Care Facilities after the union blocked about 10,000 nursing home workers from walking out last May.

According to the TA, all workers will receive pay raises of 40 cents per hour in the second year of the contract, and 20 cents in the third year, meaning some workers will see pay raises of just \$1.60 over three years. Perhaps most significantly, given the continued resurgence of the pandemic in LTCFs, workers will get a miserly \$2 or \$2.50 per hour in hazard pay if they are working with patient cohorts who have tested positive for or who have been exposed to COVID-19. Hazard pay is not being extended to all workers.

Despite claims from workers that they are being given only one mask per shift, the new agreement says

only that “members can grieve the lack of proper PPE with the union.” In other words, they may well end up working without proper PPE while they appeal to union bureaucrats to look into the matter whenever they get around to it.

When workers inevitably fall sick with COVID-19, they will be entitled to just five extra days of paid sick leave, but only “with an order from a physician.”

As a form of blackmail to convince workers to approve the agreement, full-time employees are being offered a ratification bonus of \$500, with part-timers being offered \$200. Without this bonus, workers would have faced losing that much or more in pay from being on strike, given the SEIU’s insultingly low strike pay of \$50 per day.

The *World Socialist Web Site* warned throughout the strike that SEIU will isolate and undermine the struggle while posturing as representatives of workers’ interests. Given the dire conditions and the widespread support for their struggle, workers must be wondering: Why has the SEIU has so cravenly capitulated to Infinity’s owners?

The reality is that SEIU has a long history of collaborating closely with management in working out these kinds of sweetheart deals behind the backs of workers. In recent months, the SEIU has betrayed struggles in California, where SEIU Local 1000 agreed to an over 11 percent pay cut for 96,000 state workers. It betrayed workers in the Twin Cities, where SEIU Healthcare Minnesota canceled a strike due to legal threats and in Alameda County, California, where they ended a five-day strike without a contract.

Closely tied to the Democratic Party at the local, state and national levels, the SEIU accepts the domination of the profit system over healthcare. The union works to keep struggles from imperiling the profits of the financial aristocracy that the party serves while containing the growing opposition and anger to extreme exploitation and risks from the pandemic.

In the face of the enormous dangers posed by the pandemic and the bipartisan economic and social assault being made on the working class, it is clear workers’ struggles will continue to grow.

Infinity workers should raise demands corresponding to the needs posed by the conditions they face, not what SEIU and Infinity declare is possible:

- Adequate PPE and staffing levels in all long-term

care homes across the state of Illinois, overseen by rank-and-file safety committees working with trusted medical experts.

- Doubling of base wages and substantial hazard pay for all health care workers.

- Fully paid sick leave with no penalties or restrictions during the pandemic and free health care for all workers.

- A massive infusion of resources, not into the bank accounts of the nursing home companies and investors but toward meeting the needs of the workers and their patients.

In order to raise these demands and fight for them, nursing home workers should elect their own independent rank-and-file leadership in the form of safety committees opposed to the SEIU and its partners at Infinity. Workers can follow the lead provided by autoworkers and educators in forming rank-and-file committees to 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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