

California nursing home workers strike as state surpasses New York for most COVID deaths

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Workers at the Burlingame Skilled Nursing Facility in California are on strike in protest against understaffing and unsafe conditions for residents and staff. After months of pleading with management while battling the Coronavirus pandemic, workers began the strike on Thursday demanding better wages, improved health benefits, more staff, and patient safety.

The strike began just a day after Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom announced the presence of the South African variant of COVID-19 in Northern California, and two days after the state surpassed New York to become the state with the most number of COVID deaths, 45,976 as of this writing.

Burlingame workers held a rally in mid-January where a number of workers cried out, “This is inhuman,” describing horrific scenes in the facility, and demanded that the company provide additional resources. The Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) staff have been forced to care for both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 patients in the same shifts. They have been unable to provide adequate care as patient loads have more than doubled, increasing from 10 patients to 24 patients per worker, according to staff.

According to state data, 207 residents at the Burlingame facility have contracted Covid-19 and 34 have died. At least 65 workers have also been infected. Nationwide, reports have surfaced in a number of cities that nursing care facility deaths are highly underreported.

Reynafe Mosquera, a licensed vocational nurse who has been working at the Burlingame nursing home since 2013, told the *Daily Journal* that when the pandemic began workers had to take on longer shifts and come in frequent contact with Covid-positive

patients. Mosquera said, “In December and January, it was too much. Almost every day someone had to die and it scared us.” In the last six weeks alone, 53 workers tested positive for the virus and 20 patients died.

Workers at the facility not only had to take on more shifts but saw their hours and wages change without any announcement. Mosquera said she used to work 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., but now works until 7 p.m. until she can find a replacement. Given the understaffing, she is forced to work these shifts anyway without any recourse except through striking.

Despite these horrific accounts, the union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 829, has kept workers on the job throughout the pandemic even when their contract expired last September. AFSCME, which receives over \$1 billion each year in dues payments, has not called on any of its 1.3 million members around the country to support the strike. It is working to contain and isolate the growing anger of workers, confining the strike to two days, categorizing it as an unfair labor practice strike, and are not paying workers strike pay.

Instead, the union has created a gofundme page to raise \$25,000 with the hopes of paying workers \$25/day in lieu of strike pay. Their website reads, “Please support healthcare workers and vulnerable patients in this facility by donating to our strike fund. \$25,000 in the strike fund will ensure we can stay out on strike for up to five days if necessary (\$25/ day to each member).”

Only a portion of the 150 workers at the nursing home are on strike with many remaining on the job.

The union also told local news media that the company has tried to bribe the workers who make poverty wages with \$500 to cross the picket line.

The Burlingame nursing home is one of 80 such facilities owned by Brius, LLC, California's largest for-profit nursing home company. Brius has an abysmal track record caring for seniors and workers and has been investigated by government agencies, and sued by nursing home residents and their families over chronic failures to attend to their patients and staff.

The Long-Term Care Ombudsman of Los Angeles told the *Sacramento Bee* that conditions in Brius nursing homes show a "flagrant disregard for human life."

AFSCME reports that it has been in bargaining with Burlingame since August for a 3.5 percent wage increase from last July, but the company has responded with a mere 2 percent increase. Workers also want medical coverage for themselves and their families. Management instead offered only minimal coverage to workers who had been at the facility for 10 or more years.

AFSCME representative Gaelan Ash told local news *KPIX 5*, "If you want to have your family on, it's \$900 a paycheck, or \$1,800 a month to have your spouse and children and yourself covered," adding, "And when you're making 14 bucks an hour or even 21 bucks an hour, that's completely impossible. There's no way people can afford that."

What the AFSCME official did not mention was that these poverty-level wages were agreed to by the union in the first place and workers have been kept on the job in what they describe as inhuman conditions.

One worker, Irma Bandala, said that after paying insurance she's left with only \$400 per paycheck every other week. "But they need to understand we are humans. We're not animals," she said. "They treat us like animals, 'whatever, you guys take care of the patients with COVID, if you get infected, it's on you.'"

Nurses and staff are at the breaking point after battling the coronavirus pandemic for almost a year with no end in sight. Arnel Dolores, a licensed vocational nurse, told the *Daily Journal* he has had to work with 40 patients in a day and once worked a 20-hour shift because he could not find a replacement to cover him. "Every day you come into work fearing the worst just because we don't have enough bodies to

check on the patients," he said. "We've spread ourselves thin and it's unbearable."

Despite all efforts to isolate them, the Burlingame nursing home workers are not alone in their struggle. Since the start of the pandemic, the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services has reported more than 624,000 cases among nursing home residents and 125,000 deaths. One in four Covid deaths in the U.S. took place in a nursing home. Nursing home staff have also seen more than 536,00 cases and almost 1,500 deaths.

To broaden their struggle, Burlingame workers must reach out to other sections of workers, nurses, logistics, Amazon, shipyard and dock workers, and educators who either have been working in unsafe conditions or are being forced into dangerous workplaces by both parties, and most fervently by the Democratic Party and Gov. Gavin Newsom in California.

They must begin building Rank and File committees and join a growing network of committees of workers advocating for their lives. Only a coordinated lockdown of non-essential industries can stop the pandemic but this must be fought for by rank and file workers building independent committees that they democratically control. For help setting up a Rank and File committee in your workplace, contact the WSWs at wsws.org/workers.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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