

# Hospital workers in Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania on strike

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Eighty-four workers are striking against grueling work conditions at a hospital near Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania, a small town about an hour from Scranton. The strikes involves nurses, respiratory therapists, radiology technicians, medical technologists, phlebotomists, pharmacists, case managers, supply technicians and cleaning staff at Tyler Memorial Hospital.

The hospital is owned by Commonwealth Health Systems, Inc., a conglomerate based in Franklin, Tennessee, that generated nearly \$11.8 billion in income in 2020. It expects to eclipse that figure in the coming year.

Tyler Memorial employees, who are members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) have been forced to work without a contract since February. The SEIU has announced in advance that it will pull the plug on the strike on Friday, after a total of three days.

Wyoming County, where the facility is located, is experiencing a third surge of COVID-19 cases, what the *New York Times* COVID database defines as an “extraordinarily severe outbreak.” This April has been the worst month on record for new cases. The current 14-day test positivity rate is 20 percent, suggesting that the actual spread of the virus is far greater than is reported.

“There are times when you have one person in housekeeping trying to maintain the entire building and one person on dietary trying to prepare food for the whole hospital,” registered nurse Patricia McKinney said.

Administrators are constantly changing workers’ responsibilities over the course of the day because they will not hire enough people to meet the facility’s needs. McKinney described being rotated through at least three different positions over the course of a single

shift. Employees are stretched beyond their limits and suffering burnout. “The nurse-patient ratio is one to four,” she explained, “but when two of those patients are COVID patients, that is not enough.”

Another picketer pointed to the critical role that these workers play in the Tunkhannock area. “You have to go 40 minutes in one direction or 40 minutes in another direction to get to the nearest hospital. If you had a heart attack and we were not here to stabilize you, you would die.” In addition, the sizable elderly population in the area cannot easily get to medical facilities farther away.

Striking workers noted the hypocrisy of being called “health care heroes,” pointing to the numerous signs set up around the exterior of the building emblazoned with that title. “They don’t pay us like heroes,” said one. In general, explained nutritional technician Danielle Adams, Tyler Memorial struggles to recruit and retain staff because of its “low-end wages.”

Despite the impossible working conditions, several strikers made clear that they continue to provide the highest possible level of care to patients, shouldering the consequences of the understaffing crisis themselves and working to protect the sick and the vulnerable from the hospital administration’s indifference.

Nurse McKinney, who has worked at Tyler Memorial for 40 years, said that the staff refer to themselves as “Team Tyler” because no matter the difficulties, they work as a unit to serve the community. The dedication of the hospital staff is recognized by residents and fellow workers in the area, with one striker describing the community’s response to the strike as “an outpouring of support.”

Workers at Tyler Memorial can place no confidence in the SEIU, which has kept them on the job without a contract and has already promised that it will send them

back after a few days on the picket line. Indeed, in describing the ongoing discussions with the hospital administration, one union representative acknowledged that they are “bargaining against themselves,” conceding demands without getting anything in return.

The SEIU and other unions that nominally “represent” workers have a well-used playbook. They permit small, symbolic strikes, such as the one now taking place in Tunkhannock, in order to let workers “blow off steam,” isolate and demoralize them, and then impose contracts largely dictated by the HMOs. This allows the union bureaucracy to maintain its dues revenue, and to demonstrate its “responsibility” to the financiers who rule over the health care industry.

In order to prevent this outcome it is urgently necessary for workers at Tunkhannock to break out of the straitjacket imposed on them by the SEIU. This requires forming a rank-and-file committee to advance the strike and link it up with the struggles of health care workers in other cities, as well as with educators, auto workers, steel workers and other sections of the working class that are moving into industrial conflict.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the *Health Workers Newsletter* stand ready to help. Contact us at [wsws.org/workers](http://wsws.org/workers).



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