

Strike deadline nears for 3,400 Connecticut nursing home workers

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Workers at 33 nursing homes in Connecticut could begin a strike on Friday, May 14, if their demands for better pay, benefits and staffing ratios are not met. More than 3,400 nurses, receptionists, dietary aides, housekeepers and laundry staff at these facilities have been working without a contract since March 15. Contracts at 18 other Connecticut nursing homes have expired as well, and workers at these sites could join the strike, should it occur.

The wages that the workers are earning during the pandemic—from \$12 per hour to \$15 per hour—are insulting. Workers are demanding an increase in starting wages to \$20 per hour.

Support for a strike is strong among the workers. At nursing homes where strike votes have been held, an average of 98 percent of workers have voted in favor. Service Employees International Union (SEIU) District 1199 New England sent strike notices to these nursing homes in late April.

In addition, more than 2,000 workers, also in SEIU District 1199, at group homes in the state may also strike by May 21. Residents of these homes have intellectual or developmental disabilities. By early 2022, contracts will have expired at 63 facilities, bringing the total number of affected workers to 4,500.

Since the pandemic began, there have been at least 14,000 infections among residents of Connecticut's nursing homes and more than 4,900 among nursing home workers. To date, 3,875 residents and more than 22 nursing home workers have died. Nurses and other workers at these facilities have faced understaffing, overwork and shortages of personal protective equipment.

The 33 nursing homes in question are owned by chains such as Genesis Healthcare, which had \$3.9 billion in revenues during 2020. The other affected

chains are iCare Health Network, RegalCare and Autumn Lake Healthcare.

“Nursing home workers are more united than ever. Caring for others and for each other during COVID-19 has opened people's eyes,” said Cambar Edwards, a certified nursing assistant at Kimberly Hall North skilled nursing facility, in a statement released by the union.

“We know that our work is too important to keep us in poverty. We deserve to make a living wage. We are human beings. And the people receiving care in nursing homes should be confident that staff is well paid and that there is sufficient staff to look out for them.”

“Connecticut's long-term care system relies on poverty wages,” said Rob Baril, the union's president, in a press release. “By going on strike, we are telling nursing home operators and the state of Connecticut that we are not willing to carry the yoke of poverty any longer.”

However, the SEIU has a lengthy record of isolating and betraying strikes. In the past several years, the union limited strikes to two or three days at Swedish Medical Center hospitals in Seattle, University of California hospitals, Rhode Island hospitals and the University of Virginia Medical Center.

Whenever possible, the union prevents workers from striking in the first place. After having set a strike date for more than 80,000 workers at Kaiser Permanente facilities in October 2019, the union called it off at the last minute even though workers' demands had not been satisfied. The action would have been the largest American strike in almost 20 years.

In return for the union's services, Kaiser Permanente worked with SEIU bureaucrats to create the \$130-million Futuro Health training center. Similar training centers, such as the notorious one operated by

the United Auto Workers, have been used as slush funds for union bureaucrats.

Baril is also attempting to channel workers' anger into fruitless appeals to Democratic officials. On May 1, the union led hundreds of nursing home workers in a march to Governor Ned Lamont's mansion, where they called for greater state spending on health care.

Lamont, whose career in politics spans more than three decades, is the scion of a family with deep connections to the Democratic Party and the state. He is a multimillionaire former investment firm chair and husband of venture capitalist Ann Huntress. His interests, and those of the social layer for which he speaks, are diametrically opposed to those of the working class.

On April 30, budget analysts for Lamont revised their forecast for the state's finances. They estimated that the projected surplus for the current fiscal year would be more than \$400 million greater than they had anticipated. They also increased their estimate of expected revenues for the next two-year budget cycle by more than \$1.6 billion.

In a statement made after this forecast, state Senate President Pro Tempore Martin M. Looney and House Speaker Matt Ritter, both Democrats, praised health care workers as "true heroes of the pandemic." They remarked that "providing adequate funding to nursing homes and long-term care facilities will ensure continued operations that are safe and deliver quality care."

Despite these fine phrases, the Appropriations Committee of the state legislature proposed only \$34.4 million in additional funding for these facilities in the next state budget.

But this funding would not be used to finance improved wages and working conditions for nursing home workers, Matthew Barrett, president and CEO of the Connecticut Association of Health Care Facilities, said. "It is simply unreasonable and unrealistic to expect nursing home operators to enter into costly multi-year increased funding commitments to address collective bargaining issues without the resources needed to pay for those increased costs," he told the *Connecticut Mirror*.

If the struggle of nursing home workers is to be successful, it is necessary for workers to take control of their own struggle, independent of both the SEIU and

the Democratic Party. This requires the building of a network of independent rank-and-file strike committees at nursing homes throughout the state, which will provide workers with the means of opposing the attempts at isolating their struggles by the union, maximizing their own independent initiative and appealing for the broadest possible support from workers throughout New England and the country.



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