Connecticut Democratic governor deploys National Guard on eve of nursing home workers' strike

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Connecticut's Democratic Governor Ned Lamont is deploying National Guard troops across the state, on the eve of a strike by thousands of nursing home workers on Friday for decent wages and safe staffing levels. The strikebreaking move coincides with the governor's release of his "best and final offer," which does nothing to address the pitifully low wages and dangerous conditions in Connecticut's nursing homes, where more than 60 percent of the state's COVID-19 deaths have occurred.

More than 5,000 nurses, receptionists, dietary aides, house keepers and laundry staff, members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) District 1199 New England, have been working without a contract since March 15. Some 3,400 workers at 33 facilities were set to walk out Friday, May 14, at 6 a.m., with workers at another six homes voting to join them on May 28.

In a climbdown Wednesday, the SEIU said that it would postpone plans to strike at seven of the 33 facilities targeted for strike action on Friday because the operators of those nursing homes had not made sufficient preparations to replace strikers with temporary staff. "We are not there yet, although we remain in dialogue with all parties and hope that we can achieve the funding standards that are necessary to move people up," SEIU 1199 NE President Rob Baril said.

Lamont and the state Democrats are working with the SEIU to come up with a last-minute deal to prevent a strike. If the union cannot contain the militancy of its members, however, the governor is holding the military forces in reserve.

With a wave of strikes in the US being further fueled by the sharpest rise in consumer prices in 13 years, Lamont, with the full backing of the Biden administration, has threatened to follow the same path as Republican President Reagan and Democratic governors in Arizona and Minnesota, who used military force to smash strikes by air traffic controllers, copper miners and meatpackers during the 1980s.

In a letter to Major General Francis J. Evon, Jr., adjutant general for the state's Military Department, Lamont wrote Monday: "I authorize you to immediately call up a sufficient force of members of the armed forces of the state to support as needed the Department of Public Health in protecting the public health and safety in response to any potential work stoppage or strike of workers at long-term care facilities or other congregate settings in the state beginning on or about May 14, 2021."

The deployment of troops is being carried out in conjunction with the state's Department of Public Health, which is working with operators on their "strike readiness" plans, including the hiring of replacements. According to state officials, the National Guard will not be used to replace strikers but will transfer residents from a facility with an insufficient number of strikebreakers to a better-staffed facility.

Spokespersons for the governor have cynically presented this strikebreaking operation as a humanitarian measure to ensure "an adequate standard of care" for nursing home residents. But the strike itself arises out of years of state budget cuts and bipartisan support for the cost-cutting measures by the nursing home industry, which is largely dominated by giant national chains and Wall Street private equity firms like the Carlyle Group.

Between 2007 and 2021, Democratic and Republican state legislators in Hartford have limited nursing home funding to an annual increase of 1.1 percent. The consequences of this were exposed by the pandemic, during which time 4,000 residents and at least 22 nursing home workers have died and thousands more were infected.

Governor Lamont, whose net worth is estimated at over $200 million, is determined to maintain the poverty-level wages for nursing home workers who earn a median wage of between $13.71 and $16.19 an hour depending on seniority. The governor's proposal, described by a spokesperson as a "very fair, aggressive and honest offer," includes $150 million over the next two fiscal years to fund 4.5 percent raises, $20 million for a one-time enhancement for workers' retirement benefits and $12.5 million for hazard pay bonuses. Nursing home operators would also receive a 10 percent increase in Medicaid rates worth $86 million to offset lost revenues and added expenses during the pandemic.

Confronting a militant movement of nursing home workers—who have voted by an average of 98 percent to walk out—the SEIU was forced to reject the governor's offer as "inadequate" and has called for a 33 percent increase in wages and a floor of $20 an hour.

In a reply to Lamont, SEIU 1199 NE President Baril wrote: "We are facing a critical situation in the nursing home industry with workers trapped in poverty. Operators cannot find enough job applicants to hire at current industry wages. The reduced staffing teams of existing nurses, assistants and other supports bear the

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brunt of ruthless workloads, and vulnerable patients' time of direct care."

The SEIU is working closely with the Connecticut Association of Health Care Facilities and the governor and legislators to increase the offer and try to prevent the strike. In comments to the media, Matthew Barrett, president and CEO of the health care facilities employer group, praised the SEIU and said the governor's offer was "not the conclusion of the appropriations process." A strike had to be avoided at all costs, Barrett said, adding that the "unions and the providers have to stay at the table so there can be a significant increase in appropriations from the state and by looking at federal money in the American Rescue funds."

Last year, Genesis Health Care, which operates 19 facilities in Connecticut and 450 throughout the US, took $300 million in federal CARES Act money, claiming it was on the brink of bankruptcy. It then handed its CEO George Hager a $5.2 million retention payment two months before he left with a $650,000 retirement bonus and $300,000 consulting contract.

Private equity firms, which own Genesis Health Care and other nursing home operators, are notorious for milking the government for Medicaid and Medicare payments while keeping labor and caregiving costs at a bare minimum. A February 2021 study coauthored by Sabrina Howell, an assistant professor of finance at the New York University Stern School of Business, said that private equity firms were responsible for more than 20,000 excess deaths in nursing homes over a 12-year span, based on a 10 percent higher death rate among residents of PE-owned buildings.

The pandemic made matters even worse. Connecticut's nursing homes have been plagued by low pay, staffing shortages and the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) during the pandemic, according to a study by the SEIU and Yale Law School. A review of Public Health Department citations showed 34 COVID-19-related violations at nursing homes and an average fine of less than $2,900, significantly below the allowed maximum fine.

Governor Lamont, like his fellow Democrat Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York, secured liability protection for the operators, which were also the beneficiaries of billions in bailout money from the federal bipartisan CARES Act.

There is a growing sentiment for a united struggle by health care workers, once praised by management and the media as "heroes" and now being laid off or forced to accept poverty-level wages and the continued deterioration of their working conditions. In comments to the *World Socialist Web Site*, a Minnesota nurse with 25 years of experience in long-term care and hospice, said, "Workers are not paid very well and do a fair amount of physical labor, transferring and positioning the residents. It's a physically demanding job and they only get a few dollars more than someone at Target.

"Nursing homes have a high rate of workman's comp injuries, worse, so I've heard, than coal mining. There are long hours, and most states require you to work a double shift if they are short-staffed. They ask for volunteers first, but you can be mandated to work another shift, or possibly be accused of abandonment of patients. There is a lot of turnover which filters down to poorer care for the residents. There is no law about staffing ratios, so you can have 12 residents to one nurse's aide, or more, depending on the shift."

Describing conditions during the pandemic, she said: "Certainly, with COVID, the nurse's aides are in a hot zone and STILL do not have 100 percent of the PPE they should have. Once Reagan got into office, he killed the mandated breaks for workers and now for an eight-hour shift they only give you enough time to eat your meal.

"Management knows that people work in this field because they care about the patients, so they kind of use them as hostages. They play on the care they have for the patients and use them to manipulate the workers. I support the strike. Then management can do the work and remember how hard it is."

For its part, the SEIU is notorious for signing sweetheart contracts with nursing home operators in exchange for "organizing" their low-paid workforce. Nursing home operators in California and Washington in the early 2000s dropped resistance to organizing drives in exchange for the SEIU lobbying state legislators for more Medicaid money as well as a tort-reform measures limiting patients' ability to sue over neglect or abuse. In Washington, the SEIU agreed to a ten-year "contract" that blocked workers from striking and even speaking out publicly over poor conditions.

To cozy up to state Democrats, the SEIU held a protest at the Governor's Mansion last month, calling on Lamont "to end the cycle of structural racism that devalues the work of Black, Brown, and working-class White women who make up the majority of the long-term care workforce."

But the struggle nursing home workers face is not against structural racism but the capitalist profit system, which both corporate-controlled parties and the unions defend. That is why Connecticut nursing home workers must form new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, to unify with the broadest sections of the working class to defeat Lamont's strikebreaking threats. This must be combined with the fight to transform the health care industry into a publicly owned utility and the establishment of a system of socialist medicine and care.

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