

SEIU calls off strike by Connecticut nursing home workers, accepts governor's inadequate last-minute deal

Erik Schreiber, Elliott Murtagh
14 May 2021

Connecticut Democratic Governor Ned Lamont, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and nursing home operators reached an eleventh-hour agreement to prevent 2,800 workers at 26 nursing homes throughout the state from going on strike early Friday morning. The deal will also prevent another 1,200 workers at other facilities from striking May 28.

The proposed agreement provides raises that are inadequate to ensure these essential workers a decent living in one of the country's more expensive states. Moreover, it does not address workers' demands for improved staffing ratios in nursing homes, which have been ravaged by COVID-19 infections and deaths.

Announcing the averting of the strike, Lamont cynically said, "We have a basic agreement, which is a four-year deal, to put front and center our nurses who have been there at the nursing homes taking care of our seniors through thick and thin over the last 14 months." Connecticut State Treasurer Shawn Wooden added, "I am pleased to see the State treat these essential workers with the dignity and respect that they deserve."

The tentative contract, however, does little for these essential workers who have gone through horrific experiences and worked non-stop over the past year, while making poverty-level wages.

To date, there have been over 14,000 documented COVID-19 infections of residents in Connecticut's nursing homes and over 4,900 among nursing home workers. A catastrophic 3,875 residents and at least 22 nursing home workers have died in the state, while workers faced understaffing, impossible workloads and PPE shortages.

Service Employees International Union District 1199 New England has not officially called off the strike, but postponed the deadline to June 7. But SEIU District

President Rob Baril and other members of the union brass will undoubtedly use this time to sell workers the deal.

Although the nursing homes are privately owned, 80 percent of their revenue comes from Medicaid, which is administered by the federal and state governments. Reflecting the state's extreme nervousness at the prospect of a struggle that the union might be unable to control, Governor Lamont, a multimillionaire and former investment banker worth over \$200 million, intervened in the dispute between the workers and the nursing homes with a funding proposal intended to prevent the strike. Significantly, Lamont also held in reserve the use of state force, preparing the deployment of the National Guard, ostensibly to ensure an "adequate standard of care" in the event the union could not prevent a strike.

After the SEIU rejected Lamont's previous proposal, no doubt under pressure from workers who voted 98 percent in favor of the strike, Lamont revised what he previously had called his "best and final offer" Thursday afternoon.

The new agreement includes a 4.5 percent Medicaid increase for wages and health benefits in the first year of the contract and a 6.2 percent increase in the second year, while imposing a wage freeze in the last two years of the four-year contract. Lamont's initial proposal included 4.5 percent annual wage increases for a two-year contract.

Although the wage increases in the new agreement represent a nominal improvement for nursing home workers, who make as little as \$13 an hour, a worker making this lowly wage would see increases of only 59 cents in year one and 84 cents in year two of the contract.

The offer includes a temporary 10 percent increase in Medicaid rates between July 2021 and March 2022. But this increase will not aid workers; it is intended to offset revenue that nursing homes have lost during the pandemic because of increased expenses and decreased occupancy.

Many of the privately-owned national nursing home chains, including Genesis Health Care, which operates 19 facilities in Connecticut, received hundreds of millions in federal CARES Act money last year. Genesis then handed its CEO George Hager a \$5.2 million retention payment two months before he left.

Lamont's "breakthrough" proposal is worse in many ways than his previous proposal. Increased state funding for hazard pay bonuses and stipends for workers to invest in their retirement have been omitted from the new deal, while state funds for worker training have been reduced by half of a million dollars to \$13 million. In addition, the clearest indication of the latest agreement's character is that it adds less to the next two-year state funding for nursing homes (\$267.2 million) than Lamont's previous offer of \$280.3 million.

Aside from the governor's proposal, the union must still negotiate with management at the various nursing home companies. SEIU announced yesterday that the iCare Health Network, one of the major chains that owns the nursing homes, has agreed to increase pay for certified nursing assistants (CNAs) to a minimum of \$20 an hour and licensed practical nurses (LPNs) to \$30 an hour.

However, this increase will be phased in gradually until 2023, when it will be worth less than it is now due to the sharp rise in living costs. In addition, these are not at all significant increases from the current low average wages, which, according to Indeed.com, are \$16 an hour for CNAs in Connecticut and \$29 an hour for LPNs. Nothing has been reported about improved wages for the dietary aides, housekeepers, receptionists, laundry staff and other workers at iCare Health Network's facilities under contract.

It is noteworthy that SEIU apparently called off the strike without sending its membership the tentative agreement to vote on, or even to read. In response, many workers are not convinced by the union and the state's praise over the deal. One nursing home worker who commented on the agreement on the SEIU District 1199's Facebook page bluntly stated, "It's an insult." She added, "Plus every time we get a raise the [union] dues just so happen to go up the same amount of what the raise was..."

Another worker who commented on the same thread asked, "So what about dietary aides[?] What do we get if nurses and CNAs get money[?]"

In an expression of widespread support for these health care workers and disgust at the conditions they faced, a Connecticut nursing home patient on Facebook

commented, "After my ill-fated first hip replacement surgery I spent two months getting rehabbed in a nursing home. I was immobile for most of that time. I relied on staff for essentially every need I had. These people work so incredibly hard and for the past year and a half have had to do it while putting their health and safety at risk. It is unconscionable that they had to fight this hard to get some basic compensation for the incredible work they do."

The SEIU's calling off of the strike occurs as 700 nurses at St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts entered the third month of their walkout against unsafe staffing ratios. The isolation of the strike by the Massachusetts AFL-CIO, the SEIU, the Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA) and other unions has emboldened Tenet HealthCare to begin hiring permanent replacements for the striking nurses.

Health care workers across the country and world have gone through, and are still going through, appalling experiences of mass death, overwork. They have faced dangerous conditions over the past year and a half of the pandemic due to the capitalist system's criminal handling of this medical crisis, prioritizing profit over social need and human life at every turn.

Governor Lamont, like the Biden administration and the rest of the Democrats, are promoting the unions and seeking to strengthen their grip over the working class in a desperate effort to prevent an uncontrolled eruption of the class struggle. But the unprecedented enrichment of the billionaires during the pandemic, side-by-side with the continued erosion of living standards for tens of millions of workers, has provoked a wave of strikes and other struggles, which will only be further fueled by rising inflation.

Nursing home workers need new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, to mobilize opposition to the sellout agreement and prepare a counter-offensive of healthcare workers and the whole working class against social inequality and the austerity measures of both corporate-controlled parties.

We urge workers to contact us to get more information on joining the growing network of national and international rank-and-file committees.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact