

# Connecticut nursing and group home workers straitjacketed by SEIU

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A strike planned last week by 2,100 group home workers in Connecticut, set to begin June 4, was called off at the eleventh hour by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) District 1199 New England. Working in tandem with Democratic Governor Ned Lamont, who threatened to call out the National Guard, this is the third time in a month that the SEIU called off a strike by nursing home and group home workers in Connecticut at the last minute.

The multiple strikes halted by the SEIU were planned as limited actions as part of a deliberate effort to keep the struggles of health care workers isolated. This included a strike set for May 13 by 2,800 workers at 26 nursing homes in the state. Another strike planned by group home workers across 200 group homes initially set for May 20 was postponed to June 4 and now has been called off.

SEIU District 1199 New England—the bargaining agent for 29,000 health care workers including nurses, direct care workers, CNAs, cooks, case managers, therapists, doctors, maintenance staff and home care workers in Connecticut and Rhode Island—is acting to isolate the various units, making backroom deals with the state and corporations while attempting to palm off betrayals as victories, this all in the interest of the multi-billion dollar health care industry.

The 2,100 group home workers include support staff, program coordinators, residential day program workers, assistant teachers and licensed practical nurses. They provide care to people with intellectual or developmental disabilities at 200 group homes across the state owned by six “nonprofit” providers: Oak Hill, Network, Whole Life, Mosaic, Journey Found and Sunrise.

These workers have not seen a pay increase in 14 years, including during the pandemic, where they worked under inhuman workloads. They were asking for a mere \$20 per hour wage and benefits along with smaller patient ratios to ensure better outcomes and survival for their patients.

Enthusiasm for the strike was expressed on social media, where workers expressed their determination to fight for a living wage and patient safety. “We need change for every essential worker,” and “Even 15 dollars an hour cannot take care of a family with skyrocketing rents.” Meanwhile, health care workers in nursing homes have suffered severely high rates of illness and death from COVID-19.

A joint investigation by *Kaiser Health News* and *The Guardian* found that that the reported deaths of more than 3,600 health care workers from COVID-19 in 2020 included twice as many nursing home workers as hospital workers. The report found that many of these deaths were a result of malign neglect—the policy pursued by the ruling class, which put profits before lives. In a damning indictment of capitalism, the study concluded with the following, “Widespread shortages of masks and other personal protective gear, a lack of COVID testing, weak contact tracing, inconsistent mask guidance by politicians, missteps by employers and lax enforcement of workplace safety rules by government regulators all contributed to the increased risk faced by healthcare workers.”

District 1199 called off the strike and agreed with Governor Lamont on a two-year \$184 million state funding package, the full details of which have not been disclosed to the public. Nor have the full tentative agreements between the various group homes and workers been shared with workers.

Rob Baril, president of District 1199 New England, cynically postured as having made “substantial progress toward our goals for a \$20 minimum wage, with major progress on retirement and other benefits.” Baril referred to the scotching of the planned strike by 3,200 nursing home workers earlier in May, leading to the rotten deal signed with the multi-millionaire governor, as a positive step

On the sellout deal the union agreed to on May 13, Jesse

Martin, vice president of District 1199, was obligated to note that even the poverty wage of \$20 was to be phased in. “By 2023, CNAs will be making \$20 an hour, LPNS, licensed practical nurses will be making \$30 an hour.” Gloria Plumber, a certified nursing assistant speaking to News 8, was openly contemptuous of the sellout. “During the pandemic, we were called heroes and essential workers, but yet we are not treated as heroes or essential workers. We should not have to be treated this way, begging or offered crumbs. We are better than that, we are bigger than that; we deserve a decent living wage.”

Kimberley Ackerman, a group home worker, spoke scathingly about Governor Ned Lamont’s proposal to continue poverty wages for the group home workers. She told News 8, “He wants to pay the individuals \$14.75 an hour? \$14.75 an hour? Do you know that 30 hours of your monthly salary goes to pay for your health insurance? ... A lot of people are on food stamps or are using the food banks to provide for their families because that \$14.75 is just not enough.”

While Lamont insists on poverty wages for health care staff, the Democratic governor represents the interests of the corporations and elite, of which he is part. The *New York Times* reported Lamont’s net worth at an estimated \$90–\$332 million, based on his 2006 financial disclosure. In 2018, Lamont reported federal income totaling nearly \$18 million over the past five years—which is 253 times the median household income in Connecticut.

The *Connecticut Post* was obliged to take note of the Democratic governor’s fortune when he refused to make public his federal tax returns, noting “For Lamont, home is a \$7 million, 8,300-square-foot colonial behind bushy evergreens and a high, deer-proof fence on a secluded, private cul de sac in mid-country Greenwich. Lamont’s eight bathrooms became a point of contention during the primary. The adjoining two-acre, \$1.6 million parcel was added for privacy. A few miles away, along Long Island Sound, a slick 22-foot Mako power boat is docked.” Lamont has predictably refused to raise taxes on the wealthy and was quoted in the *Hartford Courant* in May, “You don’t raise taxes when you don’t have to raise taxes.”

Oak Hill was the largest group of six that were faced with the threat of a strike. Barry M. Simon, CEO of Oak Hill, commented on the difficulties of finding replacement staff in a population that has been ravaged by the pandemic, noting that out of 600 open positions he was able to fill only thirteen.

In a desperate move, the company then started

transferring patients over to other nursing homes and even homes of the families, where possible, in the morning of June 3. Simon noted that many patients were limited in their ability to communicate and removing them from their familiar surroundings attended by highly skilled staff would take a heavy emotional cost. “They’re highly anxious. They’re terrified of this.”

The SEIU has no intention of mobilizing its 29,000 statewide membership to fight for living wages or patient safety. Instead it has worked to enforce a deal that provides a \$20 an hour wage, which is currently near poverty, and that will be worth far less by 2023.

The companies caring for these vulnerable populations are nonprofit in name only. The 2019 IRS form 990 of Oak Hill shows Barry M. Simon made \$240,422 and that the organization has paid its top eight officers \$1.2 million, including Simon. Similarly Zachary Wray, president of nonprofit Sunrise, made \$278,881 in 2018 and its nine top officers got a total of \$1.4 million.

To advance their fight for decent pay and working conditions group home workers must take the fight out of the hands of the SEIU that has tied their hands at every step. The path forward is shown by Volvo workers in Dublin, Virginia, that walked out on strike at noon Monday after their vote Sunday overwhelmingly defeating the second pro-company contract proposal agreed to by the United Auto Workers union. Workers voted by 90 percent to reject the six-year deal, which would have continued the string of concession-laden contracts pushed by the UAW spanning decades.

Health care workers should follow the lead of Volvo workers and set up their own rank-and-file committee, independent of the corrupt SEIU, to democratically decide on their demands and how to fight for them.



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