

Significant developments in class struggle among US health care workers last week

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There has been a series of developments this week in the class struggle throughout the US health care industry, where nurses, doctors and staff have been devastated throughout the pandemic by low staffing levels and layoffs carried out by hospital systems.

Chicago: Over 900 nurses launch one-day strike at Cook County Health System

More than 900 nurses across Cook County, Illinois took strike action on Thursday after contract negotiations between the National Nurses Organizing Committee (NNOC) union and hospitals Stroger and Provident, which are part of the Cook County Health system, broke down earlier this week. The one-day strike was scheduled after their last contract expired in November of last year.

The central issue for nurses is the abysmal staffing level, with the hospital system being short hundreds of nurses, leading to intolerable delays in patient care. Shortage of staff has already accelerated burnout among the nurses, after more than 600,000 Americans have died of COVID-19 since last March.

Anger has reached a boiling point as many nurses are finding it increasingly difficult to save patients' lives. One Cook County Health nurse of 23 years told the *Chicago Tribune* that in all her experience, she has never seen staffing levels so horrible, with many patients reportedly going several days without receiving basic cleanliness, such as face washings.

A trauma nurse told the *Tribune* that hospitals are not replacing nurses who quit or retire, placing an unbearable strain on working conditions. "They're just putting more workload on us, and it's not fair to the patients at all," she said.

Additional issues include demands for pay increases and adequate PPE for nurses. One nurse who spoke to the

Tribune mentioned that a colleague of hers from Stroger died of COVID-19.

Consuelo Vargas, an emergency department nurse and the NNOC's chief representative of Cook County Health, said the union wants pay increases that match up to the wages of other hospitals in the medical district Stroger is located in.

Although the NNOC union has pointed to the onerous situation facing hospital staff, it has paid lip service to the demands of the company while isolating striking nurses. The union finally decided to call a one-day strike only after nearly eight months of negotiations that have led nowhere. The purpose, however, of the one-day "Hollywood strike" was only to let nurses blow off steam. A court-ordered injunction issued Wednesday prevented nearly 330 nurses from striking, which the NNOC seized upon as a pretext to avoid prolonging the strike. Meanwhile, Cook County Health announced that it is hiring nurses from temporary agencies to fill certain roles.

Strike action approved by nursing home workers in Pennsylvania

In Pennsylvania, over 800 workers at 12 nursing homes authorized strike action on Tuesday. According to the Service Employees International Union, the nurses are striking against chronic understaffing, low pay and industry regulations.

The workers that voted to strike included nurses, nurse's aides and other caregivers. Workers who spoke to the media noted the unsustainable conditions that have been foisted upon them for years, which have been greatly exacerbated due to the pandemic.

A nursing assistant at Beaver Valley Healthcare and Rehabilitation Center told the *Times* that staffing shortages have become so severe that one or two caregivers are expected to care for more than 20 residents on a single floor.

Workers at the same home are also required to use their paid time off to quarantine if they have contracted COVID-19, despite the majority of them catching the virus at work.

A certified nursing student drew the connection between the paltry wages they are being paid and the inability of the hospitals to maintain decent staffing levels. “We need higher wages so we can get more permanent staff to take care of our residents.” The nurse pointed out how nursing home pay is invariably just as low as for those working at convenience stores but with tasks involving far more physical and mental exhaustion.

Guardian Healthcare, the owner of the facilities South Beaver and Oil City, issued a statement to the USA TODAY Network expressing disappointment over the strike vote and reproached the SEIU for not sufficiently clamping down on worker opposition. “We are troubled that the SEIU is using our invaluable team of caregivers in an attempt to manipulate the negotiation process,” the company’s statement said.

The company threatened to undermine the strike should the union go ahead with its authorization. “Should the SEIU strike, we will continue to provide the quality of care our residents and their families expect.” The company is holding out for the prospect that the union refrain from strike action altogether, stating that a strike authorization vote “does not guarantee a strike will happen.”

In its statement announcing the strike, SEIU Healthcare PA said that the state’s nursing homes “are in crisis” and that the workforce is “stretched to the breaking point” because of poverty wages and the physical and mental toll resulting from the pandemic. Pennsylvania’s nursing homes have seen more than 13,000 nursing home deaths, which the union declared were “the result of a broken system” not prioritizing “care or caregivers.”

Workers should place no confidence in the SEIU, which is no doubt working furiously behind the scenes with the company to prevent a strike from taking place. Last month the union reached an 11th-hour agreement in Connecticut to forestall a strike after Democratic Governor Ned Lamont threatened to deploy the National Guard. The deal brokered with the involvement of the state government includes inadequate pay raises and no improvement in staffing ratios.

In May of last year, after nursing home workers in Illinois voted overwhelmingly to strike, the union forced 10,000 workers to stay on the job to endure poverty wages and no protections against COVID-19, which was ravaging the state at the time.

After barely giving workers a week to read the tentative agreement and keeping them in the dark throughout negotiations, the union quickly rammed through the contract. The contract did nothing to guarantee workers’ demands for

PPE, safety protocols, hazard pay, and an array of other desperately needed provisions to alleviate the impact of the pandemic.

Meanwhile, over 700 striking nurses at the Saint Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts have been on the picket lines for more than three months against the Tenet Healthcare hospital conglomerate. The nurses are now facing the risk of permanent job losses while the Massachusetts Nurses Association union has worked night and day to isolate the strike. The union has refused to mobilize its 10,000 members in the state for strike action to defend the demands of the Worcester nurses. As is the case with all health care workers, the militant nurses have been striking for better nurse-to-patient ratios.

The strike in Pennsylvania is taking place amidst an enormous health crisis that has gripped nursing homes nationwide since the pandemic’s onset. A new report found that nursing home deaths increased by 169,300, or 32 percent, in 2020. The US Department of Health and Human Services noted that 4 in 10 residents had likely contracted COVID-19.

But there is significant potential for a successful fight by health care workers, given that workers in various industries across the country are currently engaged in strikes. This includes coal miners at Warrior Met in Alabama, steelworkers at ATI across the Northeast United States and 3,000 Volvo Trucks workers in Dublin, Virginia. However, in each case the unions are deliberately isolating these struggles from each other, wearing down the workers in order to force through sellout contracts.

The way forward for health care workers is to take the initiative out of the hands of the SEIU, the NNOC and the other unions by forming their own independent rank-and-file committees in order to break through the union-enforced isolation and link up their struggles with workers across the country. At Volvo Trucks, workers have already taken this first step by forming the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which is campaigning for a real fight against concessions.



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