

SEIU calls off strike by 1,500 Pennsylvania nursing home workers at last minute

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The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) called off a strike by approximately 1,500 nursing home workers at 21 nursing home facilities across Pennsylvania at the last minute this week, claiming to have reached tentative contract agreements with facility owners Guardian Healthcare and Priority Healthcare.

The SEIU posted the update calling off the strike on Monday afternoon, the day before the planned walkout. Nursing home workers had voted to authorize the action on June 22, citing understaffing and low wages. Dangerous working conditions were greatly exacerbated by COVID-19, which has killed over 13,000 nursing home residents across Pennsylvania. Shelly Lawrence, a certified nurse assistant in western Pennsylvania told GoErie.com, “COVID ripped the Band-Aid off what we’ve been going through for the past 20 years.”

Throughout the pandemic, nursing home workers across Pennsylvania have faced a lack of proper PPE, little to no organized infection control protocols, and high levels of staff burnout. According to an analysis by Scientific American, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data, deaths among nursing home staff ranked among the highest of any job in the US last year.

CMS lagged behind on recording nursing home workers deaths and did not begin until May, 2020, after the massive spring surge of the coronavirus. Still, nursing facilities had at least 80 deaths per 100,000 full-time employees from May 17, 2020 to December 27, 2020.

By comparison, loggers had 68.9 deaths per 100,000 people and fishers, who have the highest death rate, had 145 deaths per 100,000 people for calendar year 2019. Given that the CMS data includes only nine months of 2020, the actual death rate for nursing home workers may have exceeded that of fishers. Without proper PPE, nursing home workers were exposed to COVID-19 at high rates throughout the pandemic as the nature of their job requires close physical contact that makes social distancing impossible.

Nursing home workers are a highly exploited group. The average salary for a certified nurse assistant (CNA) in Pennsylvania is \$17.52. CNAs comprise the majority of staff in nursing facilities across the country, while there are state requirements that a Registered Nurse (RN) or Licensed

Practical Nurse (LPN) also be present to oversee the CNAs.

Many CNAs have little to no sick leave and are responsible for difficult physical tasks such as turning and bathing patients. Other nursing home staff, such as laundry workers and kitchen workers, are paid even less.

In a statement released by the SEIU announcing the strike authorization vote, Liz Empson, an LPN in Harrisburg cited extreme staff shortages.

However, details of the proposed contracts have not yet been released. SEIU officials have cited, “pretty historical raises” yet they have not released the amount. The ratification vote for the contracts will take place in the next few weeks, at which point the SEIU states they will release the full details. It is not clear if the workers voting on the contract have been able to review the contract in its entirety.

Closely tied to the Democratic Party at the local, state and national levels, the SEIU accepts the corporate domination of health care. The SEIU is one of the wealthiest unions in the country. Since 1990, the SEIU has given over \$136 million in direct political donations to the Democratic Party, at the same time seeking to contain the extreme anger and opposition of workers to the homicidal policies of the ruling class in relation to the pandemic.

Guardian Healthcare and Priority Healthcare Group own a combination of the facilities where strikes were planned. Guardian Healthcare is a privately owned, for-profit company with over 56 nursing home facilities across Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia. The company is owned by Peter C. Varischetti who paid \$15.5 million in a settlement with the federal government in February 2020 after Guardian was found to be providing unnecessary rehabilitation therapy to residents for profit, in some cases causing physical harm to residents. Ultimately, \$6.2 million in needless treatment was billed to federal health care programs at 28 facilities operated by Guardian.

Priority Healthcare, owned by David Gamzeh and Akiva Glatzer, owns facilities across Pennsylvania, Ohio and the East Coast. It is unclear how many homes Priority Healthcare owns, but it appears it oversees at least 40 facilities, with a majority in Pennsylvania. Many Priority Healthcare homes have received citations for serious violations over the past decade and have

been sued by the Pennsylvania Attorney General over allegations of poor care at several facilities, paying a \$2 million settlement on at least one occasion. In 2015, state inspectors said they discovered maggots had developed in a resident's feeding tube at a Priority Healthcare-owned facility.

The experience of nursing home workers throughout the pandemic has been one of unimaginable death and horror. At many stages during the pandemic, nursing homes have been overrun with COVID-19 infections and deaths, nursing home morgues have been stacked with bodies and residents have been left to suffer and die alone.

National data on nursing home COVID-19 deaths is similarly horrifying. About 8 percent of people who live in US long-term care facilities, a figure, which includes assisted living facilities and rehabilitation facilities, have died of COVID-19, or nearly 1 in 12 residents. For data on nursing homes alone, the figure is nearly 1 in 10. And while less than 1 percent of the US population lives in nursing homes and long-term care facilities, deaths in these facilities accounted for at least 34 percent of all US deaths from May 2020 to March 2021.

In January 2021, during an outbreak at Lakepointe nursing home in Michigan, workers told the WWSWS about their experience: "We don't have doctors, and we don't have the right equipment. All we have are some oxygen tanks. We can't take care of patients with COVID. They are just sitting here until they die."

Workers at Lakepointe created a makeshift quarantine area to separate the COVID-positive residents. "They put a plastic barrier through the hallway, to block off the last six rooms on C wing," Jamie said. "It's a piece of industrial plastic like they would use if they were doing drywall."

Experiences and scenes similar to those described above have been replicated across the world. Health care workers are reaching a breaking point. Democratic and Republican politicians label them "health care heroes" in hypocritical speeches yet at the same time prematurely end mask mandates and lockdowns, filling hospitals and nursing homes past capacity and allowing the virus to spread unhindered.

Trade unions, such as the SEIU in Pennsylvania, recognize the explosive nature of the outrage among health care workers and the need to let off steam in limited strike actions in order to prevent the mounting opposition among workers from escaping their control.

The strike vote and the subsequent last-minute cancellation in Pennsylvania raise fundamental lessons for workers, including the role of the Democratic Party and that of the SEIU and other unions. The SEIU was desperate to end the Pennsylvania nursing home strike before it even began, fearful of the strike expanding and sparking a broader struggle of workers.

In an effort to build illusions in the possibility of reform, the SEIU has praised the recent proposal by the Pennsylvania Department of Health for new rules for nursing facilities, the most significant of which would be a regulatory change that

requires nursing homes to increase staffing to a level where residents would receive 4.1 hours of direct care within 24 hours period as opposed to the current 2.7 hours. The SEIU applauded this proposal, calling it "long overdue."

The proposal, however, is not only inadequate, but unattainable, requiring 7,000 more nursing home workers across the state. That number of workers does not exist under conditions of a national and global nursing shortage. It is also unclear how this new reform would be enforced, as nursing homes continuously lag behind on inspections and routinely fail to meet existing staffing requirements.

The SEIU has a long history of collaborating closely with management to impose sordid deals behind the backs of workers. Recent struggles, including the recent Cook County struggle, the September 2020 walkout by University of Illinois Chicago nurses and university staff and the November 2020 strike at Chicago-area nursing homes ended in betrayals.

Just two weeks ago, SEIU Local 73 ended an 18-day strike by Cook County workers, sending them back to work without a vote and without a chance for workers to review the contract. The Cook County struggle and the Pennsylvania nursing home strike vote emerged as part of a broader growth of strikes by workers looking to overturn years of attacks on pay and benefits and the hazardous working conditions during the pandemic, including but not limited to struggles of St. Vincent nurses in Massachusetts, Warrior Met Coal miners in Alabama, Frito-Lay workers in Kansas, and Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia.

The Pennsylvania nursing home workers must take their fight outside the confines of the trade unions, forming independent rank-and-file safety committees and breaking the isolation of their struggle. They should demand access to the full contract proposal with adequate time to review before voting. Then they must fight for their own demands, including adequate compensation and staffing, and expand their struggle to health care workers across the nation in defense of their own lives and the lives of their patients.



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