More than 2,000 nurses and other health care workers strike at Buffalo, NY hospital

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Roughly 2,200 nurses, aides and health care staff walked off the job Friday morning in Buffalo, New York, to fight for better wages, staffing and working conditions at Mercy Hospital of Buffalo.

Workers on the picket line describe horrific conditions at the hospital. Patients' rooms, hallways, cafeterias and even medical equipment are filthy because the hospital refuses to hire enough workers.

"Very poor conditions," Carrie Dilbert, a registered nurse, told cable news station Spectrum News. "The hospital is not kept up the way it needs to be. It's very dirty. Very low staffed. The morale is terrible. The culture there is terrible."

"It's heartbreaking when I have to decide which critical patient I really need to take care of," Maureen Kryszak from the Emergency Department told Spectrum News. "If someone dies, I should be able to spend time with their family. Instead, I have to run out of the room and hope that my other patients are still alive, or breathing or stable."

Environmental service workers say they are paid less than $14 an hour. Nurse staffing levels is also a major issue. One nurse said that instead of having 11 nurses and five aides to care for their 40-patient unit, they often have only five nurses and two aides. Another nurse said that there are times when her coworkers are in tears due to stress and their inability, given massive levels of overwork, to properly care for their patients.

Mercy Hospital is run by Catholic Health, a "nonprofit" set up in 1998 to provide health care services in Western New York. As with most health care nonprofits, their status does not prevent them from paying exorbitant salaries to their top executives.

Catholic Health and the health care workers union, Communications Workers of America (CWA) Local 1133, held negotiations throughout the night on Thursday. The hospital said in a statement that it offered a contract with a 3 percent raise in the first year and 2 percent in each year after that, well below the current rate of inflation of 5 percent.

The company had also promised to add another 230 positions, but already many positions are going unfilled as people cannot afford to live on the low pay they are offered.

Workers are also demanding better health care benefits for themselves. In particular, they are angered by the high premiums they have to pay and substandard benefits.

While claiming poverty to the workers, Catholic Health has taken extensive measures to break the strike. The company is spending millions to hire scabs to work during the strike. Catholic Health spokesperson JoAnn Cavanaugh confirmed that the hospital has wired several million dollars to Huffmaster Companies, a firm which specializes in hiring scabs to work at hospitals and nursing homes during strikes.

Job posts show that the firm is paying as much as $150 an hour for registered nurses who will cross the picket line.

The strike by nurses and other health care workers at Mercy Hospitals is now the largest strike in the health care industry in the United States, and possibly the largest ongoing strike of any section of workers in the country. The striking workers at Mercy Hospital are not only fighting for themselves but they are taking a stand for health care workers throughout the country who face similar conditions.

Nurses, aides and staff at hospitals, clinics and nursing homes throughout the country are vastly understaffed and underpaid in an industry which makes billions in profits at the expense of its workers and the patients they are supposed to serve. All told, the

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industry made $1.85 trillion in revenue in 2018, with profit margins of over 8 percent.

Conditions for workers have only gotten worse throughout the pandemic, which has led to the deaths of thousands of health care workers and added untold burdens on the those who remain on the job. Worldwide, the World Health Organization reports that at least 115,000 health care workers have died from COVID. In the United States a *Kaiser Health News* study found that 3,600 health care workers had died in the seven months since March, with nurses making up 32 percent of the casualties.

This strike is part of a growing movement of workers in the United States and internationally who have faced intolerable and even deadly conditions during the pandemic while corporations' profits have skyrocketed.

Buffalo, like the rest of the country, has been devastated by the pandemic. The reopening of schools and nonessential businesses in the midst of the surge of the more infectious Delta variant is causing a massive rise of cases in Erie County, which includes Buffalo.

After seeing a low of 7 new cases per day in July, new cases have surged to nearly 300 daily with a corresponding increase in the number of hospitalizations.

The strike against Mercy Hospital follows the strike by nurses against Saint Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts, now entering its 29th week.

As of Wednesday of last week, Tenet, the for-profit company which operates the hospital, had hired 203 permanent replacements and is still refusing to give striking nurses their jobs back even though both sides settled a new contract last month in secret meetings with a federal mediator.

Throughout the strike the Massachusetts Nurses Association isolated the workers even though they were fighting against the same conditions that health care workers face throughout the country. The union has accepted the contract even as the hospital chain refuses to rehire the striking nurses.

Massachusetts hospitals continue to be stretched thin, like hospitals across the country. The average ICU bed occupancy is above 80 percent. Last week at nearby UMass Memorial Hospital only 3 of 20 ICU beds were available and doctors had to ration their care, choosing which patients to operate on depending on which would progress most quickly.

For its part the Communication Workers of America (CWA) is isolating the strikers. There can be no doubt that the union, controlled by wealthy bureaucrats whose six-figure salaries depend upon their incestuous financial relations with corporate America, is planning to force through a concessions-laden contract, as it did in the 2016 Verizon strike and the 2019 AT&T strike.

The CWA's presence in health care and other industries is due primarily to its attempt to offset its declining dues base among telecommunications workers, the result of decades of collaboration with the major telephone companies Verizon and AT&T to cut hundreds of thousands of jobs. Often it would negotiate a sweetheart deal with the employer; in exchange for keeping wages and benefits down, the companies would agree to union recognition and dues checkoff.

Workers at Mercy Hospital and throughout the health care industry need to follow the example that has been set by educators, auto workers and steelworkers who have built rank-and-file committees independent of the unions to organize their fight. For more information, visit wsws.org/workers.

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