

Mercy Hospital in Buffalo, NY: Communications Workers union works to isolate striking health care workers

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The Communication Workers of America (CWA) is isolating the 2,200 nurses, aides, technicians and staff who walked off the job on Friday and are fighting for increased staffing, better pay and working conditions at Mercy Hospital in Buffalo, New York.

Hundreds of striking workers walked the picket lines outside Mercy Hospital in South Buffalo over the weekend. Workers state that they will continue the strike until they win their demands.

Mercy Hospital is one of five hospitals as well as a number of clients, nursing homes and labs that are part of the Catholic Health system, a “nonprofit” providing health care services in Western New York. However, nurses, aides, technicians and other health care staff have been kept on the job at Catholic Health’s other hospitals and facilities.

In an agreement made with Catholic Health during their previous contract, the CWA agreed to strike only Mercy Hospital if a contract could not be reached. CWA has kept its members on the job at two of the system’s other hospitals, Kenmore Mercy Hospital and St. Joseph, whose contract has also expired.

In addition, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) 1199, which also represents workers in the Catholic Health system, also signed a four-year contract in August for workers at St. Joseph and one-year contracts at two nursing homes.

Taking advantage of the CWA’s agreement to isolate the workers at Mercy, Catholic Health presented untenable demands, including cuts to health care and pensions which would have amounted to a 6 to 10 percent pay cut depending upon years of service.

The health care system has also taken extensive measures to break the strike. Last week Catholic Health

cancelled elective surgeries, emergency room services and all labor and deliveries of newborns. The hospital also instructed ambulance services not to bring patients to the hospital.

Last week it was confirmed that Catholic Health has spent millions contracting with Huffmaster, a firm that 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. Company officials claim that they have hired 52 scabs who along with management are keeping the hospital open.

Workers on the picket line have described horrendous conditions they face of short staffing and overwork. This burden has only increased during the pandemic as many staff left for other jobs and the hospital was swamped with COVID-19 patients.

“What we’re fighting for is to have better staffing and Catholic Health to come forward and work harder to actually staff their facilities,” Tina Knop told the *Guardian*. “They’re not providing us with support, emotionally or physically, and all they want to do is cut our pay, take away the pension targets and charge more for our health insurance.”

Short staffing is the major concern of nurses and others on the picket line.

“Our hospital right now is broken and our administration does not care,” a registered nurse with 38 years at the hospital told *More Perfect Union*. “I’ve never seen conditions in the hospital as bad as they are now. In my unit it’s a 40-bed cardiothoracic unit. It is supposed to be staffed with 11 nurses every day and 5 aids. Lately we’ve been lucky if we’ve been staffed with 5 nurses and 2 aids for 40 patients.”

Cheryl Darling, an immediate treatment assistant at Mercy Hospital, described chaotic working conditions at the hospital, with workers being sent from one department to another.

“I’m afraid to go into work, because I don’t know what my day is going to be like,” Cheryl told the *Guardian*. “I go to bed the night before work and I’m a bundle of nerves, because I don’t know where they’re going to put me or what my work conditions are going to be.”

Catholic Health offered a wage increase of just 1 percent while demanding workers pay more for their own health benefits and pensions. On Friday morning, Catholic Health increased the offer to 3 percent the first year and 2 percent in each of the following years.

Catholic Health, a nonprofit, was set up in 1998 to combine several hospitals and services run by different Catholic charities in Western New York. Mercy in Buffalo, a 468-bed hospital, originally opened in 1904 as a 30-bed hospital to serve the South Buffalo community. Kenmore Mercy, a 344-bed hospital, opened on October 7, 1951. Saint Joseph Hospital, with 119 beds, opened in 1960.

Two hospitals not organized by the CWA include Sisters of Charity Hospital with 476 beds, originally chartered as the first regional hospital in October 1848, and Mount St. Mary’s Hospital & Health Center, a 155-bed hospital originally opened in 1907 in Niagara Falls.

In addition, Catholic Health runs a series of nursing homes, laboratory services and health care centers.

While classified as a nonprofit, Catholic Health in 2019 had total revenue of \$181,097,796 and net assets of \$109,404,791. The health system’s president and CEO, Mark Sullivan, earned \$1,290,346 in 2019. Catholic Health’s top six executives earned a combined income over \$5 million.

The nurses, aids and staff at Mercy Hospital are fighting not only for themselves, but for health care workers in hospitals, clinics and nursing throughout the country who are vastly underpaid and understaffed. Conditions for health care workers have only gotten worse during the pandemic, which has led to the deaths of thousands of health care workers and added untold burdens on remaining workers.

Twenty-four thousand nurses and other health care workers at Kaiser Permanente in California are

currently voting on strike authorization after the company offered a 1 percent pay raise and demanded benefit cuts.

However, to win these struggles requires the building of new workers’ organizations. Nurses and other health care workers should look closely at the experience of nurses on strike against St. Vincent Hospital in Massachusetts.

The 700 nurses have now been on strike for more than 6 months. Run by for-profit Tenet Healthcare, the hospital has hired permanent replacements for striking nurses who have been isolated by the Massachusetts Nurses Association. The union has refused to mobilize the thousands of health care workers across the state in their support.

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. These committees will work immediately to expand the strike to the other Catholic Health hospitals and facilities.

These committees will formulate a set of demands based upon what workers need and to ensure high quality care for all the communities they serve and not what Catholic Health says they can afford.

These demands will include:

- Staffing levels to be set by industry standards to ensure high quality and safe services to be overseen by the workers themselves.
- Substantial pay increases for all workers, especially the lowest paid.
- Full health and pension benefits for all employees.

For more information, visit wsws.org/workers.



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