

“We want our patients to get the staffing that’s appropriate and safe. Now it’s unsafe.”

## Striking Buffalo Mercy Hospital workers speak out

James McDonald  
8 October 2021

The strike by 2,200 nurses and other health care workers against South Buffalo’s Mercy Hospital is entering its second week. Workers are striking to win adequate staffing ratios and improved pay and conditions at the hospital, which is owned and operated by Catholic Health Services, a “non-profit” organization whose CEO, Patrick O’Shaughnessy, makes almost \$2 million per year.

“We want our patients to get the staffing that’s appropriate and safe,” said Jennifer, a nurse in the Medical Intervention Unit who has worked at Mercy for 19 years. “Now it’s unsafe.”

Giovanna, a nurse in the Cardio-Catheter Department, has been at Mercy for almost six years. “Intensive Care should have a nurse-to-patient ratio of one to two, or one to one,” she said. “Now we’re up to one to three or four. The floors should be one to four or five. Now it’s at one to eight or ten.

“Dietary is so understaffed that when it comes to be 11 or 12 and it’s time for lunch, they’re still serving breakfast. We’re lucky if we have two environmental services workers [environmental services workers] overnight. It’s not enough.”

The other key demand the workers are striking for is improved pay throughout the hospital. “Nursing retention here is terrible,” Jennifer said. “Why should they stay when they can get better pay anywhere else?”

“We have no ancillary staff,” said Karen, a nurse. She said that nurse’s aides, environmental services workers, radiologists, and dietary staff are all jobs that are understaffed in part because the pay at Mercy is so low compared to other employers in the area.

“They deserve a living wage,” Karen said of environmental services workers, whose starting wage is well below \$14 per hour. “For comparison, workers at Buffalo-area McDonald’s and Tim Hortons locations start at \$15 an hour.”

Understaffing in environmental services has had dire

effects in the hospital. “The hospital’s filthy. Disgraceful, embarrassing,” said an emotional Laura Deeds, a nurse who has worked at Mercy for 40 years. “I feel ashamed. I don’t want my family coming here. It’s not safe.”

About two hundred workers, all in red T-shirts, have kept up a lively picket line at the hospital in this working class neighborhood. Almost every driver who passes honks their horn and gives signs of support. Strikers on nearby streets, walking to and from the hospital, are also met with support.

The Mercy workers are members of the Communications Workers of America (CWA). As the *World Socialist Web Site* has reported, the CWA is isolating the strike. Although the union represents workers at two other area hospitals and several care facilities operated by Catholic Health, those workers are not on strike. In 2016 the CWA bargained away the right to strike at all the facilities, with the exception of Mercy Hospital. This is in spite of the fact that staffing and pay are as dismal there as at South Buffalo Mercy.

Catholic Health is taking full advantage of the refusal of the CWA to call a system-wide strike, spending millions to replace the strikers with scabs provided by the strikebreaking company Huffmaster.

Replacement nurses are reported in the press to be making as much as \$150 per hour. One day of their pay “is more than I make in a week,” said Christie, an Intensive Care Unit nurse who has been with Mercy for six years.

“There’s money there,” Giovanna said of Catholic Health. “It’s just where you allocate it. You have to do what’s right for workers and the community.”

The Mercy strike takes place in the context of a major rising of the working class in the US and around the world. As the WSWWS reported Wednesday, “The potential is building for the largest strike movement in the United States in generations ... Workers in the US are pushing to take their place in a worldwide strike movement that has already

involved millions of workers in South Asia and tens of thousands in Europe and in Latin America. In South Africa, 155,000 metalworkers launched an indefinite strike earlier this week.”

As workers demand better pay, safe conditions and humane hours from their employers, they are also awakening to the ugly reality of the treacherous nature of the unions. In the auto industry, the United Auto Workers has “negotiated” and enforced mandatory overtime and the notorious “seven twelves,” twelve-hour shifts, seven days a week, at auto plants like the Stellantis Sterling Heights Assembly Plant in Michigan and at auto parts manufactures like Faurecia.

The Massachusetts Nurses Association has isolated the strike of 700 nurses at St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts, allowing the hospital to hire hundreds of permanent replacements for striking nurses. The American Federation of Teachers has enforced the opening of schools for in-person instruction, endangering the lives of teachers as well as millions of schoolchildren across the country.

On Tuesday evening, the CWA held a “town hall” call-in meeting, in which union officials reiterated that “staffing is our number one priority” and their promise to maintain the strike “until there’s a ratified agreement,” but refused to say what those staffing ratios would be when asked by workers.

Asked what kind of pay increase the union was demanding, a representative dodged the question, stating only that the union was hoping to negotiate “a living wage for the lowest paid,” without elaborating.

Prior to the strike, Catholic Health had proposed an average wage increase for service, technical and clerical workers of 8.4 percent in the first year of a contract. Such a raise for an employee earning \$14 per hour would result in a wage of \$15.18 per hour, hardly a living wage. The 2 percent raises in the second and third years would almost certainly fail to match inflation.

By dodging the pay questions and only repeating the demand of the workers for improved staffing, the CWA is signaling that is hoping to reach an agreement with Catholic Health to promise to hire more people, while knowing that they will never fill those positions because of the low pay.

In 2016, the CWA and Catholic Health made a staffing agreement which only lasted for two of the four years of the contract, allowing the system to go back to the deplorable conditions.

Another question on the minds of workers on the call was strike pay. The union said that striking workers would receive benefits of \$300 per week, which would become available on the 15th day of the strike, effectively starving workers on the picket line. By comparison, the CWA controls almost \$600 million in assets. The union has asked the striking workers to apply for New York State

unemployment.

Asked about the staffing targets the union was negotiating, the CWA representatives on the call declined to give numbers, though they did insist that for critical care they would demand a ratio of one to one or one to two. They admitted, however, that the proposals package the union presented to Catholic Health did not include a staffing proposal. “We need more information from Catholic Health,” they said.

New York State mandates no hospital staffing ratios. In June of this year, Governor Andrew Cuomo signed into law a piece of legislation to sidestep the issue, establishing no ratios, while requiring staffing committees of half clinical workers and half administrators.

The committees are to meet and reach consensus on staffing levels for the various units in the hospital, with a failure to reach consensus going to the hospital CEO, at whose discretion a plan or partial plan will be adopted. This legislation will go into effect in July of 2023.

For its part, Catholic Health appears to have little interest in safe and appropriate staffing levels. JoAnn Cavanaugh, a Catholic Health spokesperson who is involved in the contract negotiations, was quoted in the *Buffalo News* as saying, “Introducing staffing ratios to the contract during a national labor shortage, as the union is proposing, will not create a competitive advantage for Catholic Health hospitals, nor will it help recruit and retain nurses and other health care workers.” How staffing ratios would prove a disincentive to nurses and other health care workers, either Cavanaugh did not say or the *Buffalo News* did not relate.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the consequences of the hospital’s staffing shortages. “We’re putting our licensure on the line” working under such conditions, said nurse Kathy Kelly, a 38-year veteran of Mercy, who says she was also born at the hospital. They are also putting their lives on the line. “We’ve lost five or six nurses to COVID,” Kelly said.

“You used to leave it at the door,” said Christie. “You can’t do that now.”

“You go home feeling you haven’t done a good enough job,” agreed Jennifer. “It’s like having PTSD after seeing what we saw...We still want to be in there working with our patients. Nobody wanted to go on strike.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**