

Connecticut group home workers launch strike against low wages and benefits

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Group home workers in Connecticut went on strike on Tuesday morning after talks with their employer, Sunrise Northeast, broke down. The workers are demanding higher wages, affordable health benefits and pensions.

Sunrise runs 28 group home and day care programs for the intellectually disabled throughout Connecticut. Workers formed picket lines in front of the company's homes in New London, Hartford, Danielson and Columbia.

The workers' responsibilities include helping residents to shower and dress and reminding them to take their medication. Like other health care workers, the group home workers have been risking their health and lives during the pandemic. As of October 13, Connecticut had recorded 2,907 new coronavirus cases and one new death during the previous week. To date, the state has seen 8,667 deaths.

Most of the 149 striking workers make less than \$17 per hour, according to a press release from District 1199 New England, the affiliate of the SEIU of which they are members. The hourly wage is sorely inadequate in Connecticut, which has an above-average cost of living, compared with the United States as a whole. Many of the state's group home workers, most of whom are single mothers, are forced to work two or more jobs to pay the bills.

"I've always worked two jobs, because we live in Connecticut, and it's not a cheap place to live," Lynette Singleton told regional newspaper the *Day*. Singleton has been working for Sunrise since 1999 and makes an hourly wage of only \$17.54. Elizabeth Esterly, another worker, told the *Day* that she has held four jobs simultaneously for most of her life.

In addition, under the program offered to Sunrise employees, monthly premiums for family health

insurance coverage are an exorbitant \$6,000. This amount is more than twice the workers' monthly wage. For this reason, many married workers rely on their spouses' insurance. Others seek insurance on Connecticut's state marketplace or go without insurance.

"What's sad is I work in the health care business, and I can't afford health insurance," worker Alexandra Martin told the *Day*. "I risked my life, and I legit am bargaining for health insurance," she said, referring to the pandemic. "It's unfair and it's unjust." Martin has worked at Sunrise for 10 years.

"I'm tired. I'm drained," direct care provider Jennifer Brown told the *Hartford Courant*. Sunrise workers have not received a raise in 15 years, she said. "No one at our agency takes insurance because it is not affordable. They [i.e., Sunrise] have money for the pension. We deserve to have everything that the governor said we deserve. He told us we could have a pension. He told us we could have affordable health insurance."

The low wages, absurdly expensive health insurance and lack of pensions have been enforced all along by District 1199 New England, which has negotiated these poverty wages for years.

The union bureaucracy has played the critical role in blocking strikes by Connecticut health care workers several times already this year. District 1199 New England concluded agreements with Network and Whole Life, two other operators of Connecticut group homes, thus heading off a strike that would have started on October 5. The union also withdrew the October 12 strike notice it had given to ASI, another operator of group homes. The SEIU affiliate thus has isolated the Sunrise workers, leaving them to face the company alone.

In early June, the union called off a strike of 2,100 group home workers at the last minute after having struck a deal behind closed doors with management and Governor Ned Lamont, a multimillionaire and former investment banker. The workers had demanded an hourly wage of \$20, which, although significantly more than their current wage, is virtually poverty-level in the state of Connecticut. Under the deal that the union negotiated, the wage will not reach \$20 until 2023, by which time it will have been substantially eroded by rising inflation. Yet Rob Baril, president of District 1199 New England, claimed that the deal represented “substantial progress.”

The union struck a similar back room deal in May, also with Lamont’s intervention, to prevent a strike of 2,800 workers at 26 Connecticut nursing homes at the eleventh hour. The contract provided inadequate wage increases during its first two years for the workers, who make as little as \$13 per hour. Moreover, wages are frozen during the last two years of the contract. The deal also failed to address workers’ demand for better staffing ratios, which improve conditions for workers and health outcomes for patients.

To disguise the union’s betrayals, Baril shook his rhetorical fist at corporate management. “Even after workers were able to leverage more than \$184 million in additional state funding from Governor Ned Lamont’s administration, Sunrise continues to deny a fair contract for its own workers while the CEO rakes in \$325,000 per year,” he told the *Hartford Courant*. Baril’s own total annual pay is \$123,911, according to US Department of Labor filings, or three and a half times what most of the striking Sunrise workers make each year.

The Connecticut group home workers are the latest health care employees to join a strike wave that is growing across the US. This month, more than 2,000 nurses at Mercy Hospital in Buffalo, New York, went on strike, and 24,000 Kaiser Permanente health care workers have voted to strike. McLaren Health nurse aides and other service workers in Michigan have rejected a deal that would have blocked a strike. In addition, more than 700 employees at Saint Vincent hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts, are engaged in what has become the longest strike in the state’s history.

These health care workers—like workers in the auto

manufacturing, food manufacturing, mining and other industries—are fighting against low wages, long work hours and expensive health benefits. But in each case the unions have directed their efforts at preventing strikes from taking place and isolating them when they do occur. The Massachusetts Nurses Association, for example, has allowed Saint Vincent hospital to hire hundreds of permanent replacements for striking nurses without any serious opposition.

The way forward for workers is to unite their struggles independently of the pro-corporate unions through the organization of rank-and-file committees, controlled democratically by the workers themselves.



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