

Buffalo hospital workers continue strike against understaffing, low pay

Jason Melanovski**17 October 2021**

About 2,200 nurses and other health care workers represented by the Communication Workers of America (CWA) are headed into their third week on strike against Buffalo's Mercy Hospital, which has continued to ignore workers' demands over staffing and low pay.

The hospital is one of five hospitals as well and a number of clinics, nursing homes and labs that are part of the Catholic Health system, a "nonprofit" providing health care services in Western New York with ties to the Catholic Church.

Despite Catholic Health's nonprofit status, its CEO, Patrick O'Shaughnessy, makes almost \$2 million per year.

In the most recent offer by Catholic Health, management proposed to add 250 new positions, a deal similar to one they had already made with the union in 2016 that ultimately failed to resolve dramatic understaffing while maintaining low pay within Catholic Health.

According to Catholic Health, new workers would also start at \$15 an hour, barely better than the current starting wage of less than \$14 an hour earned by many workers.

Catholic Health is well-aware that the low pay rates it's offering for the new staffing positions are so low it may never fill many of the positions promised in the deal.

Now that the strike has passed its 15th day, CWA members are eligible for strike pay of just \$300 per week and may file for unemployment benefits. This is a pittance compared to the \$600 million in assets that the CWA controls and is meant to force workers into accepting an inferior deal with Catholic Health.

The ongoing strike has attracted the attention of the state's Democratic Party officials, who hope to divert

the anger of workers expressed in the growing number of strikes into the dead end of support for the Democratic Party.

On Friday, New York state attorney general, and potential gubernatorial candidate, Letitia James appeared before striking workers along with State Senator Democrat Tim Kennedy wearing a CWA t-shirt.

When asked whether the appearance was an attempt to build a "coalition" in preparation for a gubernatorial run James stated, "I've been standing with labor all my public life, from the time I spent in the state legislature, to the time I was a city council member, to the time I was public advocate, and now as attorney general."

By "labor," James means the state's union bureaucracies which she hopes will back her in a gubernatorial race against interim Governor Kathy Hochul as the preferred candidate for keeping workers trapped within the Democratic Party.

Last week, James sent a cease and desist letter to Catholic Health over its hiring of the strikebreaking company Huffmaster to supply the hospital with both scab medical and security workers, which it is not licensed to do in New York state.

James cynically concluded her letter by calling on Catholic Health to reach an agreement with the CWA that merely "provides adequate wages to attract and retain staff, and that grants adequate levels of care in the hospital."

In contrast to the \$300 weekly strike pay provided by the CWA to workers, Catholic Health is paying strikebreakers contracted through Huffmaster up to \$150 an hour, signaling its determination to defeat the strike. Meanwhile, the CWA is assisting their plans by isolating the strike from other CWA workers and Catholic Health's other facilities and denying workers

adequate strike pay.

The strike is another expression of the growing militancy of workers, who continue to face dangerous conditions amid the unchecked spread of COVID-19 all while being told things have returned to “normal” and they must learn to live with the virus and accept low-pay and worsening conditions.

Workers at Mercy Hospital need to oppose the isolation of their struggle by the CWA and the Democratic Part and follow the example that has been set by educators, autoworkers and steelworkers who have built rank-and-file committees independent of the unions to organize their fight. These committees, democratically-elected and controlled by workers, will advance demands determined by what workers need and not by the profit requirements of management. They will fight to link the struggle of Mercy Hospital workers with other sections of workers, including striking Saint Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts and Kaiser Permanente nurses in California as part of a broader offensive by workers in the US and internationally.

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