

Mercy Hospital workers in Buffalo continue strike, now in fourth week

Jason Melanovski**26 October 2021**

About 2,200 nurses and other health care workers, members of the Communication Workers of America (CWA), are continuing their strike into its fourth week against Buffalo's Mercy Hospital as management continues to oppose the workers' most significant demands concerning staffing and low pay.

The hospital is one of five hospitals, as well as 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.

The CWA has done nothing to mobilize broader support for the health care workers, including linking the struggle of Mercy Hospital workers in Buffalo with the strike by St. Vincent nurses in Worcester, Massachusetts or Kaiser Permanente nurses on the West Coast.

Throughout the negotiations, Catholic Health has refused to address workers' demands for increased staffing and pay, which led to an alarmingly low level of staff-to-patients amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

In its most recent statement regarding the contract talks, Catholic Health put the entire blame for the failure to reach a deal on the CWA.

"The parties made progress this week on contract language about pharmacy benefits, prescription co-pays and overtime pay. But four weeks into its strike, the union still has no sense of urgency to reach an agreement ... We have been waiting for more than a week for CWA to respond to key proposals to end this strike, while the union has spent significant time over the last few days discussing an inconsequential proposal that would allow associates to wear red

uniforms on Thursdays."

According to published details of recent negotiations, Catholic Health had offered to add 250 new positions, a proposal similar to one they had already made in 2016 that ultimately failed to resolve the dramatic understaffing and low pay within Catholic Health facilities.

According to Catholic Health, new workers would start at \$15 an hour, barely better than the current starting wage of less \$14 an hour that many workers now receive. Senior nurses would not be offered a pay raise but rather a one-time payment.

Catholic Health is well aware that its promise to increase staffing by offering an inadequate wage subject to further erosion by inflation is completely hollow. It has in effect admitted it will be unable to hire additional nurses and will instead seek to hire more nurses' aides.

In order to dissipate the anger and militancy of nurses, the CWA has recently brought a series of Democratic Party politicians to stage photo ops on the picket line. This past Saturday, Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez addressed CWA workers after meeting with fellow Democratic Socialists of American (DSA) member and Buffalo mayoral candidate India Walton.

Ocasio-Cortez argued that nurses should get a raise due to the current shortage of labor, stating "The solution to not having enough staff is to raise wages...its simple supply and demand." This argument, by a supposed socialist, completely accepts that workers should accept that their life saving work be treated as a commodity, subject to the laws of the marketplace.

In addition to Ocasio-Cortez, both New York Attorney General Letitia James and Governor Kathy Hochul have also visited Mercy Hospital to speak to

workers in similarly well-rehearsed events organized with the participation of the CWA.

Hochul and James are expected to compete against one another in next year's gubernatorial election, and both are vying for support from the union bureaucracies. James played a central role in removing former Governor Andrew Cuomo over sexual harassment allegations.

In a gesture to the nurses, James previously sent a cease-and-desist letter to Catholic Health over its use of the strikebreaking company Huffmaster to supply 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."

For their part, Mercy Health and Huffmaster simply ignored the letter and continued their strikebreaking operations, confident that the Democrats would not enforce their order.

In contrast to the \$300 weekly strike pay doled out by the CWA, Catholic Health is paying workers contracted through Huffmaster up to \$150 an hour, underscoring its determination to break the strike and force workers to heel on management terms. In carrying out these provocations Catholic Health is relying on the CWA to help starve workers out and prevent any widening of the struggle by nurses.

Catholic Health is also reportedly considering cancelling health insurance for striking workers, another clear signal that it believes time and money are on its side and that workers will eventually be forced to return to work on its terms.

The strike is another in an ongoing series of struggles by workers, opposing dangerous conditions and the unchecked spread of COVID-19, while being told they must learn to "live with the virus" and accept low pay and ever worsening conditions.

On Thursday, in the nearby city of Rochester, workers at Strong Memorial Hospital on the University of Rochester Campus authorized a 10-day notice of job action after their contract expired.

The workers, members of 1199SEIU and SEIU Local 200 United, are similarly seeking better wages, affordable health insurance and increased staffing at the

hospital.

Like Mercy Hospital workers, Strong Memorial workers have faced highly stressful conditions throughout the pandemic.

"We're frustrated, we're tired, a lot of us worked through the pandemic with no days off," Transportation Assistant Kellie Miller said of the potential strike.

The way forward for health care workers is to unite their struggles independently of the pro-corporate unions and big business political parties through the organization of rank-and-file committees, controlled democratically by the workers themselves. These committees will seek to link the struggles of workers across sectional and national boundaries in a common fight for living wages and safe and decent working conditions.



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