

Strikes at Huntington, West Virginia hospital and metal production facility

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One thousand support staff the Huntington, West Virginia hospital system voted October 21 to authorize a 10-day strike when their current contract expires November 2. The contract covers maintenance and service workers, licensed practical nurses, and other medical support workers at Cabell Huntington Hospital and Saint Mary's Medical Center organized under the Service Employees International Union.

The staff have been under intense strain managing both the COVID-19 pandemic, with West Virginia presently one of the worst states in the country for infections, and the ongoing opioid epidemic, long centered in Huntington. Both of the city's hospitals saw record COVID-19 hospitalizations in September and ICUs at full capacity.

The vote takes place in the context of widespread strikes and protests by nurses, industrial workers, and educators who have been pushed to the brink by deadly conditions and a full-steam-ahead policy to "reopen" the economy to boost corporate profits. In the past month, strikes at John Deere, Kellogg, and hospitals across the country have involved thousands of workers.

One CHH employee, appealing for community support on social media, wrote that the hospital is attempting to set caps on pay that would punish longtime workers by "freezing any wage increases after a certain amount of years." The worker also explained "They want to take away insurance on our retirees." At the same time, the CHH system has reported \$65 million in profits (revenue in excess of expenses) and executive board pay in the millions.

Only a few miles away, 450 workers at Special Metals Corporation in Huntington have been on strike over pay cuts and company attacks on health insurance and seniority rights. The metal workers, organized under the United Steelworkers Local 40, have picketed

around the clock since October 1 to block entrances at the sprawling 100-acre plant.

Special Metals is the largest nickel alloy plant in the world. The facility is owned by Berkshire Hathaway and its billionaire CEO Warren Buffett, and operated by subsidiary Precision Castparts (PCC). The facility produces alloys critical to military jet engines and commercial aircraft, deep sea oil rigs, and other equipment for operation in high-temperature and -pressure environments.

Since the workers downed tools, the company has been intransigent on its demands. Besides cuts to pay and increases in deductibles, PCC was attempting to ratchet up penalties for missing work and erode job protections.

One Special Metals worker said, "Greed is the only word you can use to describe their actions. They want to take away time off but not be responsible to keep track of it. They bear no responsibility at all. We break rules, we're threatened with termination. They break rules, and say deal with it." In the company's press releases, largely parroted by the local media in the little coverage available, no mention is made of "the dozens of jobs they've cut and combined with other jobs over the years just to employ less people and force us to pick up the slack with no incentives or help."

The worker added, "How about the fact we were considered 'essential' through this whole pandemic yet weren't treated as such? The owner of PCC didn't get rich like he is by treating his employees fair."

Another employee said, "They have let the equipment go and treated the employees like dirt. They are a horrible company. Do not believe anything they put out there."

"Combining job duties with the same amount of pay, and you have no life due to forced OT [overtime]," said

another. “Work more for less are what they are all about. They could care less of the welfare and mental state of their workforce.”

Although the nature of their workplaces differ, employees at both Special Metals and Cabell Huntington Hospital are up against the same powerful class interests and economic forces that are driving billions of workers around the world into a confrontation with the capitalist system. The pandemic has had an accelerating effect on all the underlying conflicts between the needs of the working class and the profit motive of the corporations and the wealthy.

The United Steelworkers union has been silent on the month-long strike at Special Metals. On its website, the USW makes no call for solidarity in support of the Huntington workers. The Special Metals workers are left isolated, to be starved on meager strike pay, just as the USW has done strike after strike under its domination. Special Metals workers should review the lessons of their counterparts to the north at Allegheny Technologies, who were sold out by the union and left to be victimized by the company.

To mount an effective fight, workers must organize across workplaces and independently of the narrow nationalist and industrial confines of the trade unions. These organizations are oriented to the companies and the Democratic Party, a section of the political establishment that is, no less than the Republicans, concerned mainly with suppressing class struggle and maintaining corporate profits at all costs. In the midst of a global pandemic, “at all costs” includes the lives of millions of people, including three-quarters of a million Americans since early 2020.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Parties urge workers to contact the socialist movement to build a network of rank-and-file committees that will spearhead an independent counteroffensive to the attacks of the ruling class. To get involved, contact us.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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