

Hospital workers strike in Huntington, West Virginia

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4 November 2021

At noon on Wednesday, November 3, 1,000 workers walked out of the Cabell-Huntington Hospital (CHH) a day after rejecting a contract proposal that attacked their wages and insurance. Licensed practical nurses, lab and radiology technicians, maintenance workers, janitors and other staff, who are members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) District 1199, are picketing the hospital in downtown Huntington, West Virginia.

The strike comes amidst a wave of strikes throughout the health care system in the US, alongside strikes in auto, metalworking, and other industries. A few miles away from CHH, a strike at Special Metals, the world's largest nickel alloy plant, has entered its second month.

The hospital strike marks the first time CHH workers have walked out since 1998, although service staff have been under the SEIU for more than 40 years.

Registered nurses joined the SEIU in 2019, and some technical workers followed in February 2020. Despite being members of the same union, they operate under separate contracts, and the SEIU has forced them to remain on the job as their coworkers picket. West Virginia is a right-to-work state, and union membership has declined precipitously over the last decade with the hemorrhaging of coal mining jobs.

Cabell-Huntington Hospital workers should be aware of the treacherous record of the SEIU. In July the union shut down a powerful 18-day strike by 2,000 Cook County, Illinois workers, including 1,500 health care workers, and accepted a concessions contract. The deal did not meet any of workers' demands and included pay raises far below the actual rate of inflation.

At nursing homes under SEIU contracts, the union has enforced low wages and deplorable working conditions, leading to the deaths of patients. As many as 8 percent, 1 in 12, of nursing home patients have

died of COVID-19 during the pandemic, a horrific death toll that the SEIU has done nothing to seriously oppose.

The CHH administration prepared for the strike by ordering that elective surgeries be postponed. On Monday, before the final vote, the hospital had orange fencing and roadblocks erected along the roadfront of the entire campus, including its emergency department, to prevent picketers from stepping onto the grass. The visual was also no doubt intended to frighten and prejudice the public against the workers, who are being vilified for daring to defend themselves by way of claims that the strike is supposedly endangering patients.

The real threat to the care of patients comes from hospital management, which has maintained inadequate staffing amidst the surge of COVID-19.

Pictures circulated on social media of large tour buses idling in the parking lot, ready to unload scab workers the moment the employees walked out. Scabs were reportedly offered \$15,000 to work as replacements over the next two weeks. Divided over two 40-hour workweeks, this amounts to \$187 an hour.

This pay dwarfs the salaries of the striking workers by tenfold, a signal that the hospital administration is determined to defeat the strike, no matter the short-term financial loss, and drive down wages in the long term.

Like hospital systems around the country, Huntington's two hospitals—CHH and St. Mary's—have been pushed to the limit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Both facilities have run at full ICU capacity. They have also been faced with the ongoing opioid epidemic gripping the region. Huntington has borne the distinction as the nation's "epicenter" of the opioid crisis. Throughout these crises, the hospitals have been short staffed, and health care workers have been

worked to the bone.

Yvonne Brooks, a CHH worker of 37 years, told local television news WSAZ, “We have literally taken care of this community through a pandemic. Our workers have come to work, they have stayed over, they have been asked to come in on their days off. And we’re not being respected.”

The hospital’s offer reportedly included a wage increase that amounted to a 2 percent raise every year for three years, a rate that amounts to a substantial pay cut as basic living expenses spiral. Health care costs would spike to \$500 a month for some employees. Because CHH is a “self-insured hospital,” the change amounts to forcing workers to give back their meager raises and more.

One worker explained on Facebook, “A new part time employee in housekeeping starts out at \$14.23. Family insurance for part time employee is proposed at the lowest option \$142.98 EVERY 2 weeks!” The change would reduce her paycheck to \$270, or \$540 a month before taxes.”

Another added, “They are also wanting to make those who have retired pay for their benefits. They are no longer employed and were promised their benefits upon retirement.”

“These health care workers put their lives on the line every day!” said another commenter. “Every shift, I don’t care if they are custodians or nurses. Each day they go to the unknown of a new disease, virus, bacteria! For a rich dude [he] already took \$47 million [in federal CARES Act funding] and put [it] in the ‘for profit’ company. Then try to rape the people that are actually making the company money and risking their lives.”

“Do not tell me that these monstrous conglomerations can’t afford it,” another worker agreed. “They can and they will ONLY if they have to. Most average Americans deserve much more than they get, corporate America isn’t going to offer more just out of the goodness of their hearts. We’ve been doing more for less since the 80s. It had to bottom out somewhere.”

The potential exists for a powerful offensive by the working class, both in West Virginia and across the US and internationally. The pandemic has exacerbated the conflict between workers and the capitalist class. All the issues raised by health care workers, from inadequate pay to high insurance costs, from the

mistreatment of retirees to poor patient-staff ratios, have been intensified by the global pandemic. Now, with workers risking their lives to earn a paycheck, CEOs are demanding more sacrifices in the name of profitability.

To fight against these attacks on living conditions, workers engaged in strikes must first break the isolation imposed by their own unions. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party calls for the building of independent rank-and-file committees to form a united opposition across industries, regions, and countries. Contact us today for assistance in setting up a rank-and-file committee at your workplace.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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