

Huntington, West Virginia hospital workers continue strike

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Staff at Cabell Huntington Hospital (CHH) have maintained pickets outside the medical center around the clock after walking off the job on November 3. Organized under SEIU District 1199, 1,000 licensed practical nurses, lab technicians, maintenance and cleaning staff rejected a proposed contract that drastically hikes health insurance premiums and lowers take-home pay.

On Monday, November 8, union leaders and hospital administrators will meet with a federal mediator in a “bargaining table” discussion over the terms of the contract. Leaders on both sides are eager to shut down the strike and impose a concessions contract. The walkout is the first at CHH in 23 years.

The hospital prepared for the strike by hiring scab workers who unloaded from tour buses within minutes of staff walking out. The scab workers are being paid \$15,000 over the course of two weeks to replace the strikers. This amounts to \$187 per hour, spread over two 40-hour weeks. By comparison, a housekeeping employee starts at \$14.23 per hour.

Meanwhile, the SEIU has isolated the hospital workers, refusing to even call out all its members at CHH. Picketing has been kept at token levels despite the management strikebreaking effort.

The hospital has reportedly extended its scab recruitment efforts and is preparing to pay for replacements through the end of the year.

Health care workers, long overworked and underpaid, have reached their breaking point with the COVID-19 pandemic. Across the country, nurses and medical staff have walked out in protest over short staffing, safety hazards and attacks on their compensation.

At Huntington, the health care system has been under strain from the opioid crisis. Combined with the pandemic, hospitals have been running at capacity for

months. The COVID-19 infection rate continues to be high across the state, even as mask mandates are lifted in the public schools and virtually no mitigation measures have been implemented on the part of the state government.

West Virginia is currently the state with the lowest vaccination rate in the country, and it is the only one not expected to reach a 70 percent vaccinated rate by 2023. With the surge in the Delta variant, the state averaged about 70 deaths per 100,000, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That rate was nearly five times the rate seen in states with the highest vaccination rates. Overall, West Virginia has had three times more cases than states with high vaccination rates.

According to a tracker run by Brown University, only about 58 percent of West Virginians have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. Last month, Republican Governor Jim Justice signed legislation requiring businesses to allow exemptions to employer vaccine requirements.

As 1,000 workers picket outside CHH, on-duty staff and patients have been relaying images and descriptions of chaos inside the hospital. Registered nurses—still being forced to work even though they, too, are organized under the SEIU—have been trying to care for patients without the assistance of LPNs.

“Patient care is down big time,” reported one worker. “The interim workers in x-ray couldn’t even operate the portable unit because they are not trained on it. The few employees who are here working are so stressed out and trying their best to take care of things.”

On Facebook, workers circulated photos of bags of biohazard garbage piled up around cans outside of operating rooms. One employee reported witnessing scab workers breaking an elevator ramming a bed into

it while transporting a patient.

An anonymous worker reported: “It’s dirty, bags of trash line public hallways, or trash is just everywhere. Scabs aren’t wearing hairnets and gloves and as much as the supervisors tell them to and try to make them, they will just take them off when they leave. I wouldn’t eat the food there now anyways. Everything is delayed, courier services are a mess, registration is awful. It’s just a bad situation inside.”

All the staff positions at the hospital, including janitorial services, require a high degree of skill and safety in handling bodily fluids and potentially contaminated surfaces. With the presence of COVID-19, the risk of contamination, from patient to caregiver or a wider outbreak, is even greater.

That the hospital administration has attacked worker pay and conditions in the middle of a pandemic shows the real attitude of multimillionaire executives to the lives of their employees, patients and the broader public.

At \$4 trillion annually, the American health care industry is big business. Health care accounts for nearly one-fifth of the US Gross Domestic Product. To the capitalist class, the provision of live-saving care is treated as a source of profit and nothing more.

According to a 2020 ProPublica report, Cabell Huntington Hospital alone had a revenue of \$690.5 million. As a nonprofit, it has been tax exempt since 1988. Its top executives all pull in annual incomes of \$540,000 to \$700,000.

If CHH workers are to prevail, they must link their fight with those of other health care workers, such as the tens of thousands of Kaiser Permanente workers in California and other sections of the working class, such as striking workers at John Deere. This requires the building of a rank-and-file committee independent of the pro-company SEIU to take conduct of the struggle.



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