

# Huntington, West Virginia hospital strike enters third week

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Nine-hundred staff at Cabell-Huntington Hospital (CHH) remain on strike three weeks after rejecting a contract that would drastically increase health insurance premiums and lower take-home pay. Licensed practical nurses, maintenance and cleaning staff, lab technicians and others organized under SEIU District 1199 have maintained pickets around the hospital system in downtown Huntington since November 3.

The strike is one of two taking place in the city. Only a few miles away, 450 workers at the nickel alloy plant Special Metals continue to picket nearly two months after voting down a concessions contract that would have jacked up health premiums, cut pay and eroded job protections.

These strikes are part of a larger movement of workers coming into struggles against their employers two years into the COVID-19 pandemic. Across the US and internationally, health care and manufacturing workers have been pushed to the brink by unsafe working conditions, short staffing and overtime. Corporations have reaped record profits by deliberately endangering workers and demanded ever higher production levels in the name of “reopening the economy.”

In West Virginia, COVID rates continue to increase, officially jumping by nearly a thousand between November 14 and Saturday, November 20. According to the state’s Department of Health and Human Resources, intensive care admissions continue to rise, and the daily positive test rate stands at over 10 percent. With the lowest percentage of vaccinated adults of any state in the US, the real numbers are undoubtedly far higher.

Meanwhile, the opioid crisis continues to ravage the state. New data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show a 29 percent

increase in overdose deaths during the first year of the pandemic, with a concentrated epicenter in West Virginia. Even with incomplete data, the CDC report shows a 62.2 percent increase in fatal overdoses in the state between 2020 and 2021.

The “ground zero” of the opioid epidemic has long been centered in Huntington—making the jobs of health care workers both dangerous and vital. The dual impact of the COVID pandemic and the drug crisis has placed heavy demands on medical workers, especially at CHH.

Striking workers are now being openly attacked and vilified by the hospital administration. Last week, CHH was granted a temporary restraining order against picketers who were accused of upsetting a “healing environment” with their burn barrels and honks of support from the community. Striking workers were ordered not to play music, use bullhorns, or picket within 15 feet of the emergency room entrance. The administration has also accused workers of making threats against scab workers.

On November 11, CHH administration cut off striking workers’ health benefits, a move that workers did not find out about until one worker was turned away from a pharmacy while trying to pick up a prescription. “We put our lives into this hospital,” Shawnda Garrett, an Operating Room Sterile Technician, told local television station WOWK November 17. “We haven’t asked for anything except what we deserve. Our benefits, our health care is so important. My husband is ill here,” she explained.

“There’s single mothers and single fathers and they got children. And this health care is so important, and I worked here all these years, and I just can’t believe that somebody would try to take that from us.”

Molly Frick, the CHH Director of Human Resources, expressed the hostility of the administration toward the

workers: “We’re disappointed the SEIU District 1199 leadership did not inform its members of the consequences of participating in a strike before holding a vote to authorize the strike and requiring members to participate in one. Union leadership was well aware that a strike would result in the cessation of pay and benefits. Any employee who wishes to return to work will have all benefits restored, including health care insurance.”

The situation poses the necessity of a struggle in the starkest terms. One nurse wrote on Facebook that even if she could make the premiums, “I couldn’t afford anything else such as rent or childcare! So, for food service and housekeeping or even phlebotomists that would be half their paycheck! So, what would be the point of working at Cabell then?” She added, “They also want to take away all retirees insurance, people that have put years into the place all for nothing!”

If workers accept the hospital’s offer, they will be forced into health insurance plans costing hundreds of dollars more a month than what they already pay. While some staff start at \$14 an hour, the bimonthly cost of a family plan will rise to \$386, not including co-pays and deductibles, the lion’s share paid back into the very hospital system they work for. This “company store” situation must be rejected.

CHH and Special Metals Corporation, assisted by the unions who have done nothing to mobilize broader support, are determined to wear the workers out; both companies are pushing negotiations off past Thanksgiving, when the striking employees will be under even more pressure from Christmas expenses and cold weather settling in.

While the SEIU and the United Steelworkers, the bargaining agent for the metalworkers, are sitting on massive strike funds, workers are left isolated and dependent on charity. At CHH, registered nurses—who are part of the very same union—must continue to work alongside scabs rather than join their coworkers and force the hand of the administration.

As winter approaches, picketers have erected one-person tents and tarp structures around heaters to keep warm. At both the hospital and at the Special Metals facility, striking workers have turned to social media with appeals to the community for firewood and food donations.

To break the isolation being imposed by the unions,

Huntington workers must organize an independent rank-and-file committee and begin coordinating their struggles. A great potential exists for strengthening and expanding the struggle. Strikers must appeal to other sections of workers, including public school teachers as well as students and staff at Marshall University, of which CHH is a part, as well as other sections of health care workers, such as Kaiser workers in California. Workers seeking more information on building rank and file committees should contact the *World Socialist Web Site* .



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