

UPMC hospital workers in Pittsburgh demand better wages and staffing

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Several hundred health care workers took part in what is being billed as a one-day strike Thursday to demand better wages, working conditions and staffing levels at UPMC hospitals in Pittsburgh.

University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, UPMC, is the largest private employer in Pennsylvania, with over 92,000 employees working in 40 hospitals, more than 800 clients, nursing homes and research facilities. UPMC also runs its own health insurance company, UPMC Health Plan, and has several partnerships in Europe.

Organized by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), workers rallied in the morning outside of UPMC's flagship hospital, UPMC Presbyterian, in the Oakland section of Pittsburgh, and marched to several of the nearby hospitals throughout the day.

In the afternoon they were joined by various local politicians and union officials for a rally outside UPMC headquarters in the US Steel building in downtown Pittsburgh.

While considered a non-profit, UPMC nets hundreds of millions each year. For FY 2019-20, UPMC President and CEO Jeffrey Romoff saw his total wages, benefits, incentives and bonuses rise to nearly \$9.5 million.

Four other executives at the nonprofit earned more than \$3 million each in the 2019-20 fiscal year.

While called a strike, so that workers who took part could not be legally victimized, the events had more the character of a token protest.

Health care workers should be aware of the treacherous record of the Service Employees International Union. Currently over 900 health care workers, members of SEIU 1199 in Huntington West Virginia, are being isolated by the SEIU. They have now entered their third week on strike.

Last week, a last minute contract was arranged with Kaiser Permanente to avert a strike by nearly 32,000 nurses and other health care workers in California and

other states. The SEIU then accepted a tentative agreement that meets none of the workers' demands for better staffing, nurse retention and better working conditions.

The SEIU has been mounting a drive to organize UPMC employees. However, rather than mobilize workers to fight for better wages, benefits and working conditions, the union's organizing drive has centered on a public relations campaign to pressure UPMC to agree to recognize the union.

The drive by the SEIU for the unionization at UPMC has more to do with increasing the union's dues income than with improving the conditions of health care workers. The union is in fact offering its services to UPMC to assist the non-profit to keep control over its workforce in exchange for dues checkoff.

The SEIU, with over 1.8 million members, is one of the largest backers of the Democratic Party. During the pandemic, the union has been instrumental in pushing for the unsafe reopening of the economy in the midst of COVID.

During speeches at the rally, union officials offered few details of what they were fighting for, except for vague promises of increased wages and staffing. Most were statements assuring the workers that they were with them.

Workers at the rally expressed their growing frustration over the low wages, short staff and unsafe working conditions that they face.

Brenden has worked at Western Psychiatric Hospital for three and a half years. "We deserve more money for our job. If we were paid more, people would stay and that would help staffing levels."

Brenden explained that improved staffing would increase safety for the patients and the staff. "Whenever they are short of staff, they will pull people from other departments so they meet their numbers. But they are not trained for patient care."

As a milieu therapist, Brenden works to coordinate care between doctors, patients and families. Milieu therapists also help patients learn how to interact with others.

Earning just \$18.50 an hour is not enough, Brenden explains. “Everything is going up. Gas is expensive, food, rent, everything is going up. Everyone should be making a minimum of \$20 an hour. It would make it safer for everyone.”

Abigail, who also works as a milieu therapist at Western Psychiatric Hospital points to the growth in the need for mental health care services during the pandemic. “We are not at full staff. This is about the quality of care. With the pandemic we need more beds. There is a huge need for mental health. All they want us to do is push the patients out as fast as possible so they can bring someone else in and make their numbers.

“Money is also important. I am just getting by paying my bills. If I had a family, it would not be possible.

“My father worked for UPMC for 32 years. He had to work 60 hours a week to take care of us.

“They call us essential workers and we worked all through the pandemic but they don’t want to treat us right.”

“I took a pay cut to work in an outpatient clinic,” said a young worker who asked to remain anonymous. “I worked in the ER but wanted a more secure job.

“I was told that I would get my merit pay increase, but when it was time, I was told my time in the ER didn’t count. I work 40 hours a week, I am just barely getting by. I have to start paying my student loans in January. I will have to take day labor or a second job.”

Another major concern for workers is the cost of health insurance. Even though UPMC covers their insurance, workers are forced to pay a huge premium and co-insurance costs.

“They are making a big deal about giving us a \$500 bonus, but I had to use all of it to pay for an MRI that I needed on my knee. It’s wrong that health care workers can’t afford health care,” said Abigail.



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