

Health care workers strike at Los Angeles' Cedars Sinai Medical Center

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Over 2,000 health care workers at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles are set to strike Monday, May 9 to demand improved staffing levels, higher pay and better protections against the COVID-19 pandemic. Striking workers include certified nursing assistants, sterile processing technicians, transporters, environmental services, plant operations, surgical technicians, and foodservice technicians who are members of the Service Employees International Union-United Healthcare Workers West (SEIU-UHW).

The strike at Cedar-Sinai is the latest in a wave of struggles by health care workers against exhausting workloads, the refusal by the giant hospital chains to hire sufficient staff and the eating up of their paychecks by surging gas, food and other living expenses.

The Cedars Sinai Medical Center is located in the West Hollywood District of Los Angeles, near Beverly Hills (median income \$120,000), where most hospital service workers earning around \$17 an hour cannot afford to live. Management has resisted giving anything beyond token wage increases, despite reporting a record \$1 billion in profits last year, a 222 percent increase from 2020.

These are the same problems facing all health care workers. Instead of uniting workers in a common fight, the health care unions have isolated each section of workers, blocked strikes or limited their impact. The Los Angeles strike takes place less a week after the Committee for Recognition of Nursing Achievement (CRONA) shut down a powerful weeklong strike by 5,000 Stanford Health nurses and imposed a contract, which did nothing to address their demands for safe staffing levels and substantial raises.

Although there is widespread support for an all-out strike against Cedars Sinai, which paid its top executive

\$5.6 million last year, SEIU-UHW officials plan to end the walkout in five days. The strike is also limited to 13 percent of the hospital's workforce because the California Nurses Association and other unions are keeping their members on the job.

There is widespread support from rank-and-file workers who voted by 93 percent last month to support the strike. Several posted comments on the union's social media outlets to express their determination to fight.

"It's shameful that right here in Beverly Hills, healthcare workers are struggling to support their families on \$17 an hour. Yet, Cedars-Sinai pays its executives millions," said Yudis Cruz—a certified nursing assistant. "Cedars should invest more in their low-wage front-line caregivers and less in highly paid executives that rarely interact with patients."

Workers are "rushed, stressed out and stretched thin, which causes longer wait times for patients and delays in care," declared Jose Sanchez, a lead transporter at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.

Luz Oglesby, a clinical partner at Cedars-Sinai said, "Management doesn't seem to take patient or worker safety seriously, in our latest round of bargaining, Cedars-Sinai rejected our proposals on PPE stockpiles, COVID exposure notifications, keeping pregnant and immunocompromised workers away from COVID patients, and other safety measures.

The pandemic continues to be a major fueling the struggle of health care workers. Many workers are suspicious that the Medical Center is hiding the actual number of its staff that has been infected with the coronavirus.

In April, the State of California's CAL/OSHA agency issued seven citations against Cedars-Sinai for violating health safety regulations. Four of these

citations were classified as serious violations related to the hospital's weak COVID-19 measures. Last fall the hospital received its next to lowest rating (D) from the Leapfrog organizations Hospital Safety Group, down from a C grade in 2021, in large measure as a result of understaffing and overworked employees.

Since the pandemic, health care workers have had to confront death at an unprecedented rate. In addition to risking exposure to a deadly pathogen on a regular basis, they have also had to deal with severe mental health issues, including PTSD, which has become common among hospital staff. Tragically, a nurse at Kaiser Permanente's Santa Clara Medical Center committed suicide last month. Recent reports have shown that up to 90 percent of nurses are considering leaving the profession by the end of the year.

Although health care workers have been touted to as "heroes" during the last two years, they are now made to bear the blame for the failures of the hospital administration. Radonda Vaught, a Tennessee nurse working at Vanderbilt, was recently convicted for the death of a patient caused by a medication error. She is facing sentencing in Nashville court this week despite significant evidence that the administration enforced cost-cutting practices that contributed to the death and tried to cover it up. Well aware that this case will set a precedent for the scapegoating of nurses, a petition for clemency has now garnered over 200,000 signatures and large numbers of nurses from around the country are expected to show their support for Vaught at the court this Friday.

The conditions for a unified struggle exist but the critical question is preparing the leadership and organization of health care workers to fight back. This means taking the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the SEIU-UHW, the CNA and other pro-corporate unions and building rank-and-file committees as the unifying voice and leadership of the struggle.

This committee should outline a series of demands based on what workers and their families need, not what the corporate executives, big business politicians and union officials claim is affordable. This should include:

- A fifty percent increase in wages and monthly Cost-of-Living Adjustments (COLA) so workers can afford the surging price of housing, food, fuel and other expenses in Los Angeles.

- The immediate hiring of new staff at all hospitals, clinics and medical centers! No more phony staffing committees and empty promises. Hiring and staff levels must be overseen by a committee of rank-and-file workers, not a joint labor-management committee aimed at cutting costs.

- Advanced and sufficient health protection measures and equipment for COVID-19. No more lies about the COVID-19 numbers at Cedar-Sinai and everywhere else!

To fight for these demands, rank-and-file service workers should appeal to nurses and all hospital staff to honor the picket lines and shut down the hospital.

At the same time, calls should go out to nurses and other workers at Sutter, Kaiser, University of California and other medical centers to prepare a statewide strike to win safe staffing, living wages and COVID protections.

Cedars Sinai workers must reject the SEIU's efforts to limit the struggle to an "Unfair Labor Practice" (ULP) strike and appeals to Democratic Party politicians who are in the pockets of the health care and insurance industries. A ULP strike is not merely a legal designation, but one that ties the hands of workers by limiting them to "non-economic" demands. This is a time-tested tactic of the SEIU to cut employer-friendly deals, which betray the interest of workers.

A real fight is possible and absolutely necessary. Cedars-Sinai workers should join hands with the Stanford Nurses Rank-and-File Committee and urge all health care workers in California, the US, and internationally, to unite in a common struggle.



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