

“Don’t give up and keep fighting because it’s the only choice that we have”

Cedars-Sinai Hospital workers speak out as union ends strike without agreement

Our reporters
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The five-day strike of 2,000 hospital workers at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles concluded Friday with no agreement between the hospital and the Service Employees International Union-United Health Care Workers West (SEIU-UHW).

Cedars-Sinai workers suffer from abysmally low wages and hazardous conditions at the hospital. Several workers interviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site* related suffering multiple COVID infections over the course of the pandemic with Cedars not only providing inadequate personal protective equipment but with the hospital even advising workers that if they felt healthy, they had no reason to wear a mask at all.

The hospital, which made more than \$1 billion in profits in 2021, has been cited multiple times for safety violations during the past year alone. The California Department of Public Health issued wrist-slap punishment, including a \$75,000 fine for the 2021 death of an ICU patient while Cal/OSHA fined the hospital \$97,000 over inadequate COVID-19 mitigation measures.

The latest contract offer by Cedars includes a 16 percent pay increase over the next three years, or slightly more than 5 percent per year on average, far below the current inflation rate of 8.3 percent. Even if the salary offer had kept pace with inflation, however, it would nonetheless do nothing to address the extremely low wages of the Cedars workers, who typically average only \$18 an hour. Cedars-Sinai administrators have recently attended West Hollywood city council meetings to publicly oppose the city’s proposed minimum wage ordinance of \$17.64 per hour.

The last counter-proposal from the SEIU-UHW is also under the rate of inflation. It provides for an 8 percent

increase in the first year, followed by 6 percent increases in the second and third years. The fact that the union set an end date to conclude strike action before any deal was reached gives a clear indication that the SEIU is prepared to grant significant concessions to management.

No details have been released to membership about the latest negotiations. However, one of the union’s most recent Facebook posts, from May 12, celebrates the recent proposal by California Governor Gavin Newsom to give \$1,500 bonuses to health care workers due to the state’s recent budget surplus. This amounts to a direct subsidy to the health care giants who have no intention of paying hospital service workers a decent wage. The SEIU-UHW has also held a series of online training sessions for members on how to better manage their personal budgets and increase their credit scores.

Many of the Cedars workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* last week supported the idea of broadening the struggle to include other health care workers and 55,000 Los Angeles County workers.

Marisol, a janitor, said, “When members decide to go on strike it’s not illusory, it’s a need. It’s because there’s no other resources. There’s nothing else for them to do. Nobody wants to strike. It’s a sacrifice. It’s being here under the sun, marching, chanting, all these things. People want to be with their family, they want to go [to work], they love their job. That’s the only reason they went to school, right? To execute their career and to take care of other people. But, it’s a need. ...And if they don’t do it [fight for their needs], no one else will.”

On the issue of understaffing, Marisol said, “We are pretty much running all over the place, doing two, three people’s jobs. We’re sent to jobs we’re not responsible to do. So, yeah, it is the same big corporation that is

putting members into this situation. And they [the hospital] are getting money, big profits.”

Asked what her message was for the LA County workers, Marisol continued, “That we are here for them and that we are going to be there for them, we’re going to bring our people, we’re going to bring our families. Don’t give up and keep fighting because it’s the only choice we have.”

Josh, a Central Issues Assistant, said, “The more [workers joining together in joint strike action] the merrier. If we can take their struggle and add it to ours and add our struggle to theirs, it would be a good idea. Workers are all pretty much by and large in this together. I mean, how many people are close to or at minimum wage and if we can help them get to what they need, I don’t see what the problem is.”

Speaking about conditions at Cedars-Sinai, he said, “We are under a constant state of being understaffed and unappreciated. Usually, when we ask for more permanent people, they say, ‘Well, we can’t find them in the budget or the powers that be are telling us that we can’t. We only have a certain amount of spots we can open up and we can’t open up all of them.’ Our management doesn’t fight for us, our supervisors don’t fight for us, so it’s one of those things.”

Josh said burnout was a significant issue among nurses and workers at the hospital. “I’ve been burnt out for the last year. I can’t really get any time off, I can’t really do a lot of stuff. It’s hard to get them to give me the help I need. So, getting burnt out is like par for the course while working in a hospital sometimes. You deal with it as best you can, like maybe call off sick if you really need to and hopefully you have enough sick days to carry you through.”

Speaking to Los Angeles County workers, Josh added, “I’d say, ‘Just don’t take no for an answer and fight as hard as you possibly can for as long as you can. It’s not easy, but if you want it badly, you’ll get it.’”

Last week’s Cedars-Sinai strike ended the day a Tennessee judge announced the sentencing of Vanderbilt University Medical Center nurse RaDonda Vaught for a 2017 medication error resulting in the death of a patient. Due to the outpouring of support, the judge decided to sentence Vaught to three years probation with no jail time. But her conviction has set a terrible precedent for persecuting health care workers for medical errors, which are the inevitable outcome of understaffing, cost-cutting and the subordination of health care for profit.

Cedars-Sinai workers expressed enormous sympathy for

Vaught and recognized that they could be next in line if health care executives needed a scapegoat in the event of a similar tragedy.

An EVS worker who did not want to be named said, “Mistakes happen. It could’ve been any one of us who made that mistake. Every part of the story puts Vanderbilt to blame. It’s the same thing here, and there. I’m happy she’s not getting jail time, but she shouldn’t have even been charged. I just hope it’s not us next.”

A Clinical Partner (CNA) at Cedars said, “It’s the system that does this. Everything. And all for profit. The overworking, the exhaustion, the bad pay ... the trauma! How can anyone pin it all on her? There’s a nursing shortage now. How does this [Vaught’s sentencing] help it? [Vanderbilt] should have been charged, not her! I know it’s the same here. We need to all fight as one.”

The turnout of thousands of nurses and other health care workers in support of Vaught is part of a growing movement in the US and around the world. The biggest obstacle to unifying these struggles is the unions, which are allied with the pro-business Democratic Party.

The SEIU-UHW did not begin the Cedars-Sinai strike until the Committee for Recognition of Nursing Achievement (CRONA) shut down the powerful weeklong strike by 5,000 nurses at Stanford Medical Center in northern California. The union also ended the Cedars strike before the possibility of a strike by 55,000 Los Angeles County workers, including thousands of nurses and hospital workers who are also members of the SEIU.

Cedars-Sinai workers should follow the lead of nurses at Kaiser and Stanford, public school teachers and workers in manufacturing and logistics who have set up rank-and-file workplace committees, which are independent of the unions and corporate-controlled Democrats and Republicans. These committees will fight for what workers need, including good wages, health benefits, adequate staffing and workers’ control over workloads and scheduling. They will also fight to mobilize the whole working class to take profit out of medicine and replace it with a socialist health care system.



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