1,200 Buffalo nursing home workers conduct two one-day strikes

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Are you a Buffalo nursing home worker? We want to hear from you! Fill out the form at the bottom of the article to tell us about your working conditions and what you want to see change. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Twelve hundred workers at 12 different nursing homes in Buffalo, New York took part in two one-day strikes Tuesday and Wednesday. The workers, who are members of 1199SEIU (Service Employees International Union) United Healthcare Workers East, voted by over 98 percent to authorize strikes earlier this month.

The workers are demanding better pay and increased staffing. Workers have been without a contract since earlier this year, with the last contract of the group expiring April 30.

Many workers make less than $15 an hour, barely above the poverty line for a family. “I'm living paycheck to paycheck,” Donna Gregory told Buffalo Public Radio. “The rent is so high now that a two-bedroom [apartment] is $1,200 [a month]. There's no way I can afford that with the pay they’re giving me, so it affects me horribly.”

Donna, a certified nursing assistant, told the radio station that she has worked at the Garden Gate nursing home in Cheektowaga since 2005, but makes less than $15 an hour. Nursing home workers have always been some of the lowest paid workers, but the impact of inflation, running at nearly 10 percent, is taking a severe toll.

The nursing homes were massively understaffed even before the pandemic. Hundreds of workers caught COVID as the pandemic raged through nursing homes, many have died, and many others still suffer from long COVID.

A CNA who has worked for seven years posted on social media that she is “tired of working short staffed. They’re willing to pay agency more than us dedicated workers. We know our residents; we love them so much.”

The wages are slightly different at each facility, but on average a service worker, including those in housekeeping, laundry and cooking make on average $13.20 an hour. CNAs—Certified Nurses Assistants—make around $15 an hour with LPNs—Licensed Practical Nurses—make only slightly more.

Another major grievance is that wages don’t automatically increase with seniority. Workers who have been there for 10 years will be making the same as a new hire. Not only does this mean workers are stuck at poverty wages, but it also leads to workers leaving the profession for higher paying jobs elsewhere, leaving the nursing home both understaffed and with an inexperienced workforce.

“I’ve been here 31 years and so much changed in 31 years,” Rebecca Bettis, a cook at Autumn View told Spectrumlocalnews.com. “I come here every day to cook good food because they don’t have much to look forward to. Food’s one of them. They don’t have family so we love them. We’re their family.”

Spokespersons for the nursing homes have said that they plan to fill any staffing gaps with staffing from temporary agencies. A new New York state law set staffing requirements of 3.5 hours of care per resident per day.

However, the law is both totally inadequate and vaguely written. A resident who requires assistance with eating, let alone bathing, can easily need more than 3.5 hours of care a day. Also, what counts as care can extend to housekeeping staff. There is no enforcement mechanism, with each nursing home itself

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having to keep records on its own level of care.

1199SEIU has not indicated exactly what it is fighting for. A recent contract signed by the union has service workers receiving a starting wage of $15 an hour, CNAs a starting wage of $16.50 am hour and LPNs starting at $24 an hour.

Even at these levels, many workers will still fall below the official poverty line, which is the dismally low amount of just $21,960 for a family of three, or just $26,500 for a family of four. At $16.50 an hour it would take 1,656 hours, or nearly 42 weeks of full-time work, for a family of four to be above poverty.

Such a settlement would not make up for last year's cost of living. Officially, inflation topped 9 percent last month, but for low wage workers, who have less available cash after paying for fixed costs like housing, utilities and transportation, there is little left over for food, clothing, medicine and other necessities which have skyrocketed.

The strike by nursing home workers in Buffalo is part of a growing movement of health care workers throughout the United States and, in fact, the world to demand better wages, staffing and working conditions.

Last year approximately 140,000 workers went on strike. Workers in the health care industry were particularly active, making up over 35 percent of all strikes and accounting for over half of the workers involved in strikes. However, according to a Cornell University report, these workers only accounted for 7.5 percent of the number of strike days, meaning most of their strikes were limited to one- or two-day actions.

The calling of one-day strikes among health care workers rather than uniting all health care workers in a powerful strike movement is a deliberate tactic employed by the unions to allow workers to let off steam while knowing full well that it will have no effect on the companies.

In addition to the 1,200 nursing home workers, over 6,300 workers at Kaleida Health have been without a contract since June. The two unions, 1199SEIU and the Communication Workers of America (CWA), continue to avert calling a strike and instead instruct their members to work on month-to-month extensions.

Last year, CWA isolated the strike by 2,200 nurses and other healthcare workers at South Buffalo Mercy Hospital, eventually forcing through a four year contract where workers were forced to vote on it even before seeing the full details of the contract.

The CWA rejected calls for a cost of living adjustment and instead held up the small wage increases as a tremendous victory. In reality, the increase of 13 to 15 percent over the four years of the contract will be more than eaten up by the inflation. In real dollars, nurses and other health care workers at Mercy Hospital are working for less than what they were making a year ago and they won’t catch up during the rest of the contract.

1199SEIU is seeking to play the same game of keeping the workers divided, organizing protest actions to let off steam while preparing to push through a totally inadequate contract with wage increases below the inflation rate and no cost of living agreement.

Health care workers deserve a substantial wage increase, safe staffing levels and a full cost of living adjustments throughout the life of the contract to ensure that wages are not eaten up by inflation.

Such a struggle cannot be entrusted to the bureaucrats of 1199SEIU or the CWA and the struggle must be taken out of their hands. Health care workers must join autoworkers, educators and others in forming rank-and-file committees democratically elected of the most militant and trusted members to lead these struggles. First and foremost, these committees will have to break the isolation of the workers by uniting all nursing home workers, including those of the public sector as well as health care workers at Kaleida Health and Mercy Hospital in an all out battle to win.

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