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Pennsylvania nursing home workers launch strike against poverty pay, low staffing

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On Friday, nearly 700 licensed practical nurses (LPNs), certified nursing assistants (CNAs), support and dietary staff launched an unfair labor practices (ULP) strike against long-term care providers owned by Comprehensive Healthcare and Priority Healthcare.

The strike was called after the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) accused the nursing home operators of failing to “provide significant enough investments into staffing and care,” according to a statement published after talks broke down early Friday morning.

The strike is impacting 14 long-term care providers, with another four set to go on strike on September 9 if no agreement is reached. Nurses and health care workers are striking over poverty-level pay and impossible staffing ratios, with a single certified nursing assistant (CNA) sometimes caring for as many as 30 long-term patients at a time.

“Conditions are very poor,” stated Rahman Armitage, a striking CNA from Wilkes-Barre, to the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Poor staffing, poor nurse-to-patient ratios. There is insufficient staffing for housekeeping, for maintenance. Patients are not getting the quality of care that they pay for.”

According to Patricia Stack, a caregiver on strike at Comprehensive Healthcare’s Harmony Grove facility near Pittsburgh, “Twenty years ago I was making \$12 an hour. I make \$14 now. We deserve better, and our residents deserve better. For them [Comprehensive Healthcare], it’s a few dollars [more]. But for us, it’s a choice between getting a lump checked in our breast versus feeding our family. How is that fair?”

“Our residents live in a broken-down home where their blankets are thin, their sheets are stained. We

don’t have enough care for them. You can’t run a business about *care* without *caring*,” Stack explained.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average pay for a CNA is just over \$16. The Pennsylvania SEIU is demanding CNAs make \$20 an hour, while LPNs receive \$25. Food and support staff would receive \$16.

Nearly 11,000 nursing home residents have died due to infections from COVID-19, a ratio of nearly 1 in 10. The state of Pennsylvania has provided nearly \$500 million in assistance to nursing homes during the pandemic. But all money given has failed to address the dire needs facing this portion of the population and its caretakers.

The strike has developed as Pennsylvania’s Democratic Governor Tom Wolf recently signed a state budget which includes nearly \$600 million directed at long-term care support. Nearly \$250 million in additional federal stimulus is set to also be given to the state’s nearly 700 for-profit long-term care facilities.

While the Pennsylvania budget stipulates that at least 70 percent of these earmarked funds must be directed toward “resident-related care,” numerous media outlets have noted that this requirement has not been clearly defined.

“I don’t know what goes into that 70%,” Diane Menio of the Philadelphia-based non-profit CARIE, which advocates for the elderly, told *SpotlightPA*. “Private investors have been buying up nursing homes ... and then hiring outside agencies to staff and provide key services, such as food and laundry,” Menio told the publication.

“Sometimes, the investors may even have a stake in the contracted agencies,” Menio added, likening the

state's Medicare and Medicaid funds to a "piggy bank" for the private companies.

Even should these funds reach their intended targets, they are still inadequate. The Wolf administration has earmarked \$300 million per year in Medicaid to fund long-term patient care. This represents a 17.5 percent increase in state funding, or \$35 more per day for each patient. For its part, the Pennsylvania Health Care Association has stated that in order to meet the SEIU's demands, an additional \$35 per patient in state funding is needed.

However, according to a February report released by LeadingAge PA, "the [Pennsylvania Medicaid] funding gap for nursing facilities statewide results in a total shortfall of \$1,164,784,000, or \$86.26 per resident day."

Medicaid is the primary form of government funding for long-term care facilities. Without such funding, the costs must be borne by families seeking end-of-life care for their loved ones.

The strike of 700 nursing home workers develops against the backdrop of a rising tide of working class struggle. In health care, nurses at the University of Michigan have voted overwhelmingly to authorize strike action. In July, 1,200 nursing home workers struck in upstate New York. Over 2,000 Kaiser Permanente mental health workers in Northern California are currently engaged in a weeks-long strike against low staffing and other forms of exploitation. Internationally, Australian nurses on Thursday struck against their state government's attempt to impose wage cuts on them.

While nursing workers are waging a struggle for decent pay and better working conditions, the SEIU has limited the strike to an ULP (Unfair Labor Practice) over the disbursement of the governor's already limited funding. The provision of the money, which will go into effect over the next few months, would conceivably satisfy the organization's demands.

The organization announced a tentative agreement with 18 other private nursing facilities owned by Guardian Healthcare earlier this week. It called off a strike that was announced a week earlier without giving workers the chance to vote on the provisions of the offer to determine if it was worth altering their plans.

Last year, the SEIU called off a planned strike among 1,500 Pennsylvania Guardian Healthcare and Priority

Healthcare workers, using the same method of announcing a tentative agreement in order to call off the struggle. Last week, the SEIU Local 32BJ called off a planned strike by Philadelphia public school workers, again without giving members a say in the decision, in order not to conflict with the city's Democratic Party-run government as it prepared to open schools for fall.

The SEIU is a key constituent of the Democratic Party and major contributor to the election of its officials. According to the *Washingtonian* magazine, SEIU President Mary Kay Henry (yearly salary of \$289,000) is "arguably the most influential union voice within the [Biden] White House." The organization has made nearly \$140 million in direct donations to Democrats in the past 30 years.

In Pennsylvania, this has led the SEIU to pledge support to the Wolf administration. The state Department of Health recently backed off from rules requiring a minimum of 4.1 hours of direct patient care. This would have brought the state up to the minimum required amount based on federal guidelines.

The Wolf government instead bumped up the required hours of direct patient involvement to 2.87 hours per day. This represents a marginal improvement beyond the previous amount of 2.7 hours.



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