

“We can’t go on like this”: Striking Pennsylvania nursing home workers speak out on issues behind their strike

Our reporters
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Are you a striking nursing home worker? Contact the WSWS to tell us about your working conditions and why you’re fighting. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

The strike by 700 nursing home workers at 14 long-term care facilities throughout Pennsylvania is entering its second week. It will expand to four more additional nursing homes owned by for-profit health care companies Friday, including another at Camp Hill and one in Gettysburg.

Nurses, support staff, and health and dietary aides stood in pouring rain over the past weekend, including on Labor Day. They are fighting poverty wages as low as \$14 per hour, expensive, limited-access health care plans, unsafe building conditions, and insufferable staffing ratios. Management routinely forces workers to take on multiple jobs for the same amount of pay.

Nursing home workers are angry that they risked their lives caring for patients during the pandemic and received nothing in return, despite being patronized as “essential.” Most have seen a co-worker or a patient contract COVID-19 and pass away or have been infected themselves.

“We are supposedly called ‘heroes’ but we are paid zero and are treated like zeroes,” said Kayla Ayauvi. A nurse with four years’ experience, she said that she worked such long shifts that she often did not go home. “I was working 24 hours, sleeping here” during the first months of the pandemic.

In one of the most tragic and scandalous COVID-19 outbreaks at a nursing facility in 2020, all 800 patients and staff at Brighton Rehabilitation and Wellness Center, located in Beaver County, contracted COVID, and some died. Management and Pennsylvania SEIU Healthcare President Matthew Yarnell refused to provide PPE to employees and close down the facility, compelling a wildcat walkout by staff that forced a shutdown, saving many lives.

“We are working poor. Today is day number 7 on strike and we are getting nothing [in strike pay],” said Tina, a certified nursing aid (CNA) at the Gardens at West Shore,

located near Harrisburg. There are “single mothers and women out here. The dietary starting rate is horrible and we are not making a decent living,” she said. Vicole, a nurse at the Gardens in Wyoming Valley, near Wilkes Barre, stated simply, “We can’t keep up. We can’t go on like this.”

Workers are also demanding better care and food for their patients who are just money signs for the companies. Patients at these nursing homes have come out in support of strikers. At Rose City Nursing & Rehabilitation in Lancaster, 67-year-old Pam Laird, who has lived in the nursing home for seven years, joined striking workers to show her solidarity. “I’m supporting the workers. They need more money, and they need more help,” she said to *Lancaster Online*.

“These are our residents’ homes, their personal homes. We are their guests. We come in to take care of them, to clean up and make sure they are well,” stated Kayla, explaining the shared interests of the workers and the patients.

Workers and patients alike have suffered through the pandemic and from corrupt and uncaring management. “We don’t have the staff. We don’t have the PPE. We don’t have the equipment. We don’t have safety while taking care of residents. We need the money we went and got for them. It’s not for them to pocket,” said Kayla.

“They owe us money for like two years during COVID and won’t give us a raise. Now they are bringing in temp scabs who are making 30 or 40 dollars an hour and some are making more than we are,” said James, a cook at the West Shore facility.

The nursing home industry, just like the health care and pharmaceutical industry, is a very lucrative business. It exploits its underpaid and overworked staff while price-gouging customers. On top of this, the private entities running these residences often pocket the already-meager sums of money provided by federal social spending programs such as Medicare and Medicaid[1][2]

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) called an unfair labor practices strike after negotiations broke down with Comprehensive Healthcare and Priority Healthcare. The SEIU is accusing the companies of failing to invest in its employees after Democratic Governor Tom Wolf handed these corporations \$600 million from taxpayers in the current state budget, no strings attached.

An additional \$250 million in federal money is expected in the coming months. During the pandemic, Pennsylvania funneled \$500 million more in assistance to nursing homes, without any guaranteed safety mandates or money for employees and patients.

“[Management] want to keep all this money. We need COVID pay, decent pay. Ninety percent paid by the company for insurance, and we need Capital Blue insurance. No doctors take Cigna insurance, only in New York and New Jersey,” said Tina, a CNA from The Gardens at West Shore.

Elisha, a housekeeper from the same facility, said her management “kept all the money, 70 percent” of what the government had paid them in emergency funds. Since then, “Nothing has changed. No improvements [to the building]. It is all jacked up in there.”

“We have poor management and had three different managers in the last year that have no idea what they are doing,” said James. “They know nothing about food! They eliminate jobs such as prep cooks, and we have to do more.”

“I have 20 residents a night who need to be turned and changed. There are not enough people to care for patients,” said Tina. “The company is now hiring people without certification to work in the kitchen. Patients have no snacks and it [the snack machine] is filled every three days. There is no fresh fruit, and two chicken strips and a piece of bread is [considered] a meal. For Thanksgiving, they get lunch meat with gravy on it.”

This strike unfolds as many sections of the working class are entering into struggle against the profit system under conditions of rapid inflation for basic necessities and living expenses and signs of an impending recession. The ongoing proxy war in Ukraine between NATO and Russia will only exacerbate the downward-spiraling economic situation for the working class.

Last week, nurses in Michigan voted by 96 percent to authorize strike action against the fifth largest hospital system in the state. The same conditions in the United States are driving workers in other countries to strike. In the beginning of September, nurses and midwives struck in New South Wales, Australia, over similar issues prevailing in Pennsylvania nursing homes. They are demanding minimum nurse-to-patient ratios of 3:1 in emergency departments and 4:1 in other areas, along with a 7 percent pay increase.

At the Pennsylvania picket lines, workers greeted WSWS reporters, taking literature on their struggles well as statements from United Auto Workers (UAW) presidential candidate, socialist worker Will Lehman. Lehman is leading an insurgent, rank-and-file campaign for UAW president.

One of the workers, Racheal, said she was familiar with the campaign. The nurses gladly took brochures on his candidacy. “Go Will!” they yelled, after a reporter explained that Will stands for broadening and coalescing all of the struggles of the working class together, behind a socialist program.

The SEIU and representatives for the two corporations have not scheduled any further contract talks. Before hundreds of workers walked off the job, however, SEIU officials made a tentative agreement with Guardian Healthcare at 10 different locations, deliberately nixing additional walkouts and weakening the unity of striking workers.

In addition, workers are being starved of strike pay. “We don’t get as much strike pay as we used to. We are supposed to get \$40 dollars a day, still haven’t seen it and this is day 7,” said James.

The decision to sanction an unfair labor practice strike, while giving workers a chance to vent, means the well-paid SEIU officials can end the strike once the companies make overtures to negotiate, regardless of what is offered and without input from the workers.

On Thursday, the SEIU held protests in front of government buildings in Harrisburg. In a social media post, the organization said that it wished to thank “all the elected officials who have striking nursing home workers’ backs—from standing with us on the line to speaking out.”

It praised various state Democratic Party officials for “historic funding for nursing homes” but failed to note that this money, which includes \$300 million in Medicaid funding, would not cover the massive shortfall in funds for nursing residences.

According to *LeadingAge PA*, the current shortfall in Medicaid funding alone is \$86.26 per-patient a day. In contrast, the allotted \$300 million would only cover 35 extra dollars per-patient a day. This would be the case if state and federal funding were not diverted and pocketed by various corrupt corporate operators.



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