

6,300 Buffalo, New York health care workers vote to strike Kaleida

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15 September 2022

Are you a health care worker? Fill out the form at the end of the article and tell us about the conditions you face and what you think about uniting with health care workers across the country to fight for safe staffing and other improvements.

More than 6,300 nurses, aides, dietary workers, personal care attendants, maintenance workers, housing service and other health care workers voted overwhelmingly this week to authorize strike action against Kaleida Health, the largest medical care provider in Western New York. According to the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1199/United Healthcare Workers East and the Communications Workers of America (CWA), workers voted by 96 percent to strike.

Joining the growing movement of health care and other workers who have been striking or seeking to strike throughout the country, Kaleida workers are demanding higher wages to keep up with the cost of living and increased staffing levels to stop burnout and ensure better care for their patients.

Workers at Kaleida hospitals and clinics in the Buffalo area have been working without a contract since the end of July, after two one-month extensions agreed to by CWA Local 1168 and 1199SEIU UHW East. The unions have been determined to prevent a strike and only called the vote because of growing anger among workers towards the intransigence of Kaleida and the repeated retreat by the unions.

Over 1,000 workers were joined by supporters from the community for an informational picket outside Buffalo General and Oishei Children's Hospital, showing the growing support.

“All through the pandemic they called us ‘Heroes’,’ said one worker. “Yet they will pay traveling nurses double and triple what nurses here get paid.” She

pointed out that without more pay nurses are leaving for other jobs.

“Shut it down since they don’t listen WE can show them what they working with,” one health care worker posted on the union Facebook page.

Executives of the health care system admit they are short 436 full-time positions across their network just to meet state-mandated staffing requirements. Workers say the system needs to hire 800 more workers to make up for those who have left and to provide adequate care for patients.

“There are not enough people on our unit to take care of people,” said one aide. “We are short-staffed but will be the first to be blamed if something goes wrong.”

Since their last contract, workers have suffered a cut of over 15 percent in real wages due to surging inflation even as they have been forced to do more work.

For workers on the lower end of the pay scale, the impact of inflation is even worse. According to recently published reports, the average family is spending \$460 more a month for basic living expenses than they did a year ago. Many of Kaleida's jobs don't pay even \$15 an hour, meaning that those workers have lost more than half a week’s pay per month over the past year due to inflation.

The Buffalo nurses are part of a growing movement of health care and other workers throughout the country. This week 15,000 nurses struck for three days in Minnesota against poor staffing and overwork. In Northern California, mental health providers at Kaiser have been on strike for more than five weeks of an open-ended strike.

The same conditions exist in industry after industry. On Thursday morning, the Biden administration, the unions and rail companies reached a last minute deal in a desperate attempt to prevent a strike today by more

than 100,000 railroad workers against intolerable working conditions.

the unions are working to suppress the growing movement. In Buffalo, the two unions intend to ignore the strike mandate or if forced to call a strike do everything they can to make sure it has the least impact on Kaleida and other hospital giants.

A strike is “the last thing we want to do,” James Scordato, 1199SEIU’s vice president of the Western New York hospital division told the *Buffalo News*. “We want to take care of our patients, take care of the people in this community. That’s what we do, and the last thing we want to do is call for a strike.”

1199SEIU and the CWA have been deliberately isolating health care workers from one another. Last year, health care workers at Catholic Health Mercy Hospital in South Buffalo went on strike for six weeks. The union had previously agreed not to call workers out at other Catholic Health hospitals and facilities.

Earlier this month, 1199SEIU settled a contract for workers at seven nursing homes while leaving workers at two others without contracts. Workers at those seven homes received a \$15 an hour wage for service workers and just \$16 an hour for certified nursing assistants (CNAs) and just \$24.75-an-hour-starting rates for licensed practical nurses, LPNs.

The agreement isolates workers at the two other nursing homes, Humboldt House Rehabilitation and Nursing in Buffalo and Fiddler’s Green Manor Rehabilitation and Nursing Center in Springville, where the company is refusing to grant even these meager wages.

Under state law, the unions must first give 10 days’ notice before launching a strike. The union has also indicated that if they do call a strike, it would not affect Kaleida’s entire system, but more likely be limited to Buffalo General.

The union is also hoping for a settlement before a potential strike becomes a catalyst for a far broader movement of health care workers. In December 2022 and early 2023, contracts covering another 30,000 nurses in the New York State Nurses Association expire. The unions fear that the struggles of these workers could erupt into a common fight for better wages, staffing and working conditions.

The SEIU and CWA maintain the closest relations with the Democratic Party, which defends big business

and the profit-driven health care system. While opposing any real struggle to unite health care workers, the unions are parading around various Democrats as supposed “friends of workers.” But the Democrats, no less than the Republicans, have responded to the pandemic by sacrificing workers’ lives and health to corporate profit. Among the more than 1.1 million people who have lost their lives, and the millions more debilitated, and tens of thousands of health care workers.

Workers at Kaleida Health Care system need to follow the example that has been set by other health care workers, educators, auto workers and railroad workers who have built rank-and-file committees to take the initiative out of the hands of the union apparatus and transfer it to the workers.

These committees must formulate a set of demands based upon what workers need and to ensure high-quality care for all the communities they serve and not what Kaleida says they can afford.

These include:

? Staffing levels necessary to ensure the health and safety of workers, along with their patients. These ratios must be enforced by rank-and-file committees, not bogus labor-management bodies.

? Substantial pay increases for all workers and full cost of living protection. Double the pay of the lowest pay workers.

? Full health and pension benefits for all employees.

Are you a health care worker? We want to hear from you. Let us know what are the conditions at your job? Do you want to form a rank-and-file committee?



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