

Resident physicians in Queens, New York, could strike next week

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About 300 resident physicians at Jamaica Hospital and Flushing Hospital in Queens, New York, could wage a three-day strike next week if they fail to reach an agreement with MediSys Health Network, which owns the hospitals. The action would be the first strike of New York City physicians since 1990, when resident physicians at Bronx-Lebanon Hospital walked out for nine days.

The residents are demanding a living wage and better benefits. They also have made urgent proposals to improve patient care, including regulations to keep patients safe, adequate time for each patient and a cap on the number of patients per resident.

“It’s very expensive to live in New York City,” Dr. Uchenna Chinawke, a resident of internal medicine at Flushing Hospital, told the *Queens Daily Eagle*. “My wonderful colleagues do a lot of good work for the community catering to the health of our patients, not just from Queens, but frankly from all over the world. The last thing they need is to be concerned about or worried about how they’re going to take care of their families and put food on the table while they’re doing this.”

Negotiations have dragged on since November 1, 2022. The Committee of Interns and Residents (CIR), the union to which the workers belong, says that management has resisted all their demands. The CIR also has filed seven unfair labor practices charges against MediSys. It alleges that management has refused to schedule bargaining sessions and canceled bargaining sessions at the last minute without notice.

In late April, the residents voted by approximately 93 percent to authorize a strike if no agreement is reached. This overwhelming authorization vote is a clear demonstration of workers’ anger at the conditions that they face, which are similar at hospitals around the

world.

To begin with, the residents at Jamaica and Flushing hospitals routinely work 80-hour weeks. They must see a new patient every 15 to 20 minutes, and each resident often is assigned 40 or more patients at a time. The grueling schedule and onerous workload inevitably affect the quality of care that a resident can provide each patient.

In addition, the residents are required to perform duties that could be performed by ancillary staff, such as drawing blood. These additional responsibilities take residents away from the bedside and further reduce the time that they can spend with patients. The residents also have expressed concerns about the amount of supervision that they receive, understaffing and lack of support from the administration.

Another major grievance is the workers’ wages, which amount to \$15 to \$17 per hour. This range is far below a living wage for residents of New York City. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology calculates that a living wage in Queens for a single adult with no children would be \$25.65.

“All the medical staff have been working hand in hand to provide appropriate medical care and quality care for all our people in the community,” Dr. Muhammad Abbas, a resident at Jamaica Hospital, told the *Queens Daily Eagle*. “Now we feel that we have been taken advantage of.”

The strike authorization vote in Queens takes place amid an upsurge in militancy among health care workers worldwide. It occurred only three months after more than 7,000 nurses at Mount Sinai Hospital and Montefiore Medical Center, also in New York, waged a powerful strike. In the United Kingdom, thousands of nurses, junior doctors and ambulance drivers have struck repeatedly. All these workers are fighting against

the inadequate wages, understaffing, overwork and austerity that the healthcare corporations and capitalist governments are imposing.

Instead of conducting a genuine fight for their members' most basic needs, the healthcare unions have worked to enforce the interests of management. The New York State Nurses Association kept nurses at Mount Sinai and Montefiore isolated from those at New York's other hospitals. It shut down their strike after only three days and sent nurses back to work without even having finalized a tentative agreement. The final contract did not address understaffing in any serious way, and the raises that it provided were in fact cuts to real wages when inflation is considered.

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) has weakened the UK nurses' strikes by limiting them to a few days each. It attempted to make its members ratify an agreement that would have provided raises that are less than half the rate of inflation, leaving them financially worse off than they were in 2008. When the nurses began discussing a potential no confidence vote in the union leadership, the RCN threatened to call the police to investigate them.

The CIR, which is affiliated with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), is no different from the other health care unions. It is already attempting to limit the strike of the resident physicians at Jamaica and Flushing hospitals. If CIR's schedule were to be followed, the strike would begin on the morning of May 15 and end on the morning of May 18. The limited nature of the strike is aimed at using merely to vent workers' frustration as well as buy time to allow the union to arrive at an agreement favorable to MediSys.

Around the time of the strike authorization vote in Queens, other SEIU members picketed a Trinity Health hospital in Grand Haven, Michigan. These imaging technicians, laboratory assistants, social workers, patient care associates and other workers are protesting intolerably low wages, poor benefits and management's refusal to negotiate a contract with them. The SEIU has refused to mobilize any of its 17,000 members in Michigan to defend the Grand Haven workers.

If the resident physicians at Flushing and Jamaica hospitals are to win a living wage, along with the support they need to provide the best patient care, they

must break free from the CIR and SEIU apparatus, which is working to sabotage their fight. They must form new organizations of struggle: rank-and-file committees that are independent of the trade unions and all capitalist political parties. Through these committees, the residents can reach out to other health care workers, as well as workers in other industries, to wage a more powerful fight. They must confront not only MediSys, but also the entire for-profit healthcare system, which must be replaced with socialist health care.

Are you a resident physician in Jamaica or Flushing, Queens? Fill out the form below for more information about rank-and-file committees.



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