

Resident physicians strike at Elmhurst hospital in Queens, New York

Robert Milkowski
23 May 2023

About 150 resident physicians at Elmhurst Medical Center in Queens, New York, began a five-day strike for better wages on Monday. They also are demanding hazard pay for the physicians who worked at Elmhurst during the beginning of the pandemic, when Queens was severely affected. This is the first strike of New York City physicians since 1990, when resident physicians at Bronx-Lebanon Hospital walked out for nine days.

Although the striking residents work at Elmhurst, which is a municipal hospital, they are employed by the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in Manhattan. No agreement has been reached after almost a year of contract negotiations. The residents are members of the Committee of Interns and Residents (CIR), which has accused management of negotiating in bad faith.

Martha, a resident physician on the picket line, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “We’re not able to survive. It’s shameful!” Her name has been changed to protect her identity. “I’ve had a couple of colleagues who tell me they have holes in their shoes! If you’re going to call us health care heroes when we’re on the front lines and risking our lives, then *treat* us like health care heroes!”

Like workers everywhere, residents at Elmhurst struggle to make ends meet. “Because of the economy, it has become very difficult to pay our bills,” Martha said. “Inflation is very high, and we’re stretched so thin that a lot of us considered taking second jobs, but we’re not even able to do that, because we’re supposed to be working here 80 hours a week, so there’s no time. So, we can’t even afford to live in the community we’re serving.” Feelings “of need and desperation” have motivated the strike, she added. “We want to be financially comfortable, at a level where we’re able to focus on providing care for our patients, rather than worrying how we’re going to pay our rent.”

Many of the striking Elmhurst residents come from working class backgrounds or are international workers

training in the United States. Thus they are sensitive to the fact that they work at a public hospital that serves mostly poor, immigrant patients—and they are paid less than their colleagues in private Manhattan hospitals. The local Democratic politicians and union officials who spoke to the striking residents on Monday relentlessly repeated the theme of “pay parity.” For the Democrats who control city government, this is a self-indictment. It also obscures the fact that resident physicians at public and private hospitals alike are underpaid and struggling.

“Right now, I fall short every single month and I have to ask my parents to help support me—and they’re working-class people,” Martha told the WSW. “The other vulnerability here is that a lot of us here are first generation. I’m the first person in my family who graduated from college, who became a doctor. My parents don’t necessarily have the means to pay rent for me, but with the way rent has skyrocketed over the last three years, it’s just becoming increasingly difficult.”

The residents’ dedication to their work was evident. “Three years of serving this community, I’m very humbled, and I love the care we’ve been able to provide,” she said. “The level of work we’re asked to do—we literally save lives, we care for people’s lives—when we’re getting compensated \$10, \$15, \$18 an hour? It’s shameful. I’m exhausted. I’m burnt out. Fortunately, I’m graduating in a couple months, but I’m here for my colleagues.”

Three years ago, Elmhurst was among the first hospitals in New York to gain international attention during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. “We were the epicenter of the epicenter and had to put everything on the line,” Martha said. “When I matched here, Elmhurst was in the news: there were refrigerated trucks outside because there wasn’t enough room in the morgues because of the number of fatalities.”

Martha’s experience affected her deeply. “When I

started, all I ever saw was COVID. I'd just graduated from medical school. That's not how I thought I'd be starting residency. We expected to see a breadth of pathologies. We saw colleagues with post-traumatic stress disorder. The ones there earlier in March 2020 had this glazed look in their eyes and told us, 'You will never understand what we went through.' You could feel the impact of the trauma experienced here."

Like other health care workers, the residents at Elmhurst got little reprieve. "Wave after wave, we were pulled out of electives [elective procedures] to come and serve COVID patients. There was a new wave every couple months. A lot of us had no time to spend with our families. Early on, we had no vaccines. We didn't know what the consequences of this virus would be—we didn't understand it. I was afraid for my life. There was a lot of fear, but there was a calling, we were asked to put ourselves on the line. We love it, and it's very rewarding, but we need to be compensated. When you're struggling financially, you reach a breaking point."

When asked about broadening the strike to include other health care workers, Martha replied, "There's a tremendous need! But a lot of colleagues in our position feel very vulnerable, because we matched into residency with nothing left to fall back on. It's not like we can just find another job, and that's the reason why they have the rules and regulations that they do. If we get dropped from this program right here, it's like we spent 10 years getting to this point and then we don't have a residency program anymore. It's very hard to match again—we're extremely vulnerable. I think if other residents felt supported, and that there wouldn't be retribution, I think that—absolutely—there would be a wider movement."

Other workers are expressing their solidarity with the Elmhurst residents, indicating the potential for broadening the strike. "There are those in non-unionized positions who, behind closed doors, tell us they support us, but being non-unionized they can't publicly support us," said Martha. "Even on social media, they fear retribution, so they're not able to come and have our backs. We came out, but there's a much larger group of repressed physicians in training that would love nothing more than to express the frustration of the last three years."

Rather than promoting unity, CIR has separated the Elmhurst residents from their fellow CIR members in Queens. In a midnight announcement on May 15, the union called off a strike of about 300 resident physicians at Jamaica and Flushing hospitals, saying that it had reached an agreement with management. The deal

provides raises that barely keep pace with inflation. Nor does it guarantee the residents a living wage in one of the most expensive cities in the country.

Although CIR did not call off the Elmhurst strike, it has limited it to five days. Moreover, the union has designated the action an unfair labor practices strike, which legally cannot be linked to any of the broader issues at stake in a contract struggle, such as wages. This benefits hospital management and weakens the Elmhurst residents' position, especially in terms of broadening their struggle to other residents and health care workers. The decision to call off the strike of residents at Jamaica and Flushing hospitals, and to limit the Elmhurst strike, makes clear that the CIR leadership will not wage a genuine fight on behalf of its members.

In the health care industry and all other sectors, the trade unions enforce the interests of the corporations at the expense of their own members. The unions also have integrated themselves into the Democratic Party, which has overseen the end of all mitigation measures to fight the pandemic and is now colluding with Republicans in Congress to slash social spending by billions of dollars. This money is to be funneled into NATO's proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, which has resulted in an estimated 354,000 casualties to date.

The residents at Elmhurst are showing their determination to fight as part of an upsurge of health care workers' struggles across the world. To succeed, the Elmhurst residents must seize the initiative from CIR and form a rank-and-file committee to wage a fight in earnest. This committee must reach out to other workers at Elmhurst and at all hospitals in New York and beyond. The fight for better pay and better patient care is inseparable from the fight against for-profit medicine, which must be replaced with a socialist system that recognizes health care as a human right.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact