

Nursing home strike in Redford Township, Michigan

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Nursing home workers at Orchards of Redford began a strike at the facility in Redford Township, an inner suburb of Detroit, Michigan, on Tuesday, June 13. The strike involves between 60 and 70 dietary workers, resident assistants and certified nursing assistants (CNA) at the facility.

Orchards Michigan is a set of 11 privately owned assisted living communities throughout the state. The facility at Redford has approximately 45 residents. The company's website lists their special features as "post-acute care, long-term care, assisted living, Alzheimer's/memory care and outpatient physical therapy."

Orchards at Redford has an overall Medicare rating of only two stars out of five, mostly due to poor health inspection results. The most recent inspection in January resulted in the issuance of 22 health citations. In the past three years, 80 complaints about the facility led to health citations.

The striking workers at the Redford facility are members of the Service Employee International Union (SEIU) Healthcare of Michigan. The union initially gave notice to Orchards of Redford on May 19 that the strike would occur on May 31. Then, for reasons the union has not explained, the strike was postponed until June 13.

According to Kevin Lignell, SEIU Healthcare of Michigan's communications director, contract discussions with Orchards Michigan have hit a dead-end. He told the *Detroit Free Press* that Orchards at Redford is not "budging on anything. They are one of the lowest-paying nursing homes in this area."

The issues leading up to the strike are very low pay, insulting proposed raises and lack of staff.

Speaking with the *Free Press*, Kim Ford, a CNA at the Redford facility, broke down the wages for different

employees. Dietary workers receive \$11 per hour; resident assistants get \$12; and CNAs get a mere \$14 or \$15 per hour. She also mentioned that Orchards has proposed a pathetic 25 to 50 cent per hour wage increase over three years.

According to Amy La Fleur, vice president of operations at Ciena Healthcare, in Michigan CNAs make an average of a mere \$17 per hour (*Detroit News*).

Kim Ford said, according to an SEIU press release, "Orchards' poverty wages make us feel like we are second-class citizens. A CNA like myself has been doing this for 20 years to get the same starting wages as a brand-new CNA at other nursing homes. Dietary and housekeeping workers in this facility still make as little as \$11 per hour. Orchards' proposals won't do enough. We can't provide the care that our residents deserve until we are able to recruit and retain qualified staff with competitive wages."

The union is reportedly seeking \$20 per hour for CNAs and \$15 to \$17 for resident assistants and dietary workers, claiming this will bring pay closer to other facilities in Detroit. This demonstrates two facts, however: 1) The wages at all nursing home facilities in the Detroit area are abysmal, and 2) the wages at Orchards, towards the bottom, would require much larger raises to offset runaway inflation.

The staffing crisis in nursing homes extends far beyond Orchards of Redford. Since the coronavirus pandemic, nursing homes have lost 210,000 workers at the national level, including 10,000 in Michigan, according to a January 2023 article on *Crain's Business Detroit*.

In January of this year, over 1,000 workers at 13 nursing home facilities in metro Detroit voted for strike action. Instead of calling out these 1,000 workers in

force, SEIU Healthcare of Michigan isolated each home and made separate agreements except for Orchards of Redford, which is now on strike, and another facility the union does not name.

In February, SEIU Healthcare gave notice to Heritage Manor and Pine Creek Manor, both owned by the health system Pioneer, that the 110 workers at these facilities were going on strike. However, the union reached an agreement at the last minute and called off the strike.

In March, the union gave notice to Ciena Health that more than 500 workers at Regency of Livonia, Sheffield Manor, Hartford Nursing and Rehabilitation Center, Regency at Whitmore Lake, The Manor of Farmington Hills, Regency of Westland and Willowbrook Manor would go on strike. The union's website and Facebook show no evidence of any such strike taking place.

In April, workers held an informational picket at the Pinecrest Medical Care Facility in Powers, Michigan, which is in the Upper Peninsula, a nursing home which was not on the original list of 13.

Out of the original 1,000 workers, only the Redford workers appear to have actually gone on strike. The SEIU claims that it has reached agreements with the Pioneer and Ciena facilities "with significant wage increases and more affordable health insurance." No details have been made public.

The strategy of SEIU Healthcare of Michigan is to appeal to capitalist politicians in the Democratic Party. In a Facebook post on the current strike, the union promoted the presence of "elected officials" and "labor allies" on the picket line. Among these were Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, who addressed the workers on the fourth day of the strike, Friday, June 16. Her speech consisted of confused platitudes and abstract appeals to "human dignity."

The Orchards nursing home is located within the congressional district of Tlaib, who is affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America, a faction of the Democratic Party. The Democrats are worried that a strike among nursing home workers, who are the most oppressed and exploited among healthcare workers, will expand into a larger, broader strike of this major section of the ruling class. Hence the efforts of the union and "left" Democrats like Tlaib is to isolate, exhaust and ultimately put an end to this strike.

It is important for workers to understand that capitalist politicians and union bureaucrats are not "allies" in their struggle. The way forward is not to beg the capitalist class for scraps but to unite all workers in a common struggle against the corporations, the union bureaucracies and the capitalist politicians.



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