

Healthcare workers at Loretto safety-net hospital on Chicago's West Side go on strike

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Around two hundred healthcare workers at Loretto Hospital, located on the West Side of Chicago, began their strike for better wages on Monday after negotiations with the administration collapsed Sunday. Hospital management released a brief statement saying they were “not able to reach an equitable and sustainable agreement.” As is common with such strikes, temporary replacement workers have been brought at a reported cost of \$1.5 million for one week.

The striking healthcare workers, who include respiratory and radiology technicians, mental health and behavioral health workers, patient transporters, emergency room technicians, and those who labor in housekeeping, belong to the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Healthcare Illinois, which has 90,000 members in the state.

The union is asking for a raise in minimum starting wages to fill vacancies and an increase in current workers' pay to match other facilities. SEIU officials are pitching this to management as a way to retain workers and lower retraining costs.

With an annual turnover rate of 60 percent, the remaining staff are constantly stretched beyond their limits. This directly impacts the safety of patients. About 25 to 35 percent of non-nurse and non-physician positions remain vacant and with the high turnover rates, a hospital can barely operate, and poorly at that. About 120 union workers left last year due to low wages.

One healthcare worker, Jessita Davis, who has been working double shifts, told ABC-TV news that many of the full-time staffers who have been tenured are still only making \$17 to \$18 an hour. “I can't pay my bills because I'm underpaid,” she said. “But I still come to work every day because I have to take care of my son, and I love my job. So, I'm here.”

Wellington Thomas, an emergency room technician, directing his comments to management, told the local news station, “We want to end the strike the best way possible” and “take care of our patients, but how can we if you make us struggle? You don't staff us. You don't protect us. And we have to continue to take it. You want to put us back in the Stone Age and that's not going to happen.”

Mental health specialist Lynda Robinson told ABC-TV that the staff at Loretto must deal with many violent patients on a daily basis, people whose lives have been shattered by the abject poverty and social crisis that afflict working class communities across the country. Staff shortages only compound the violence workers face, for which the hospital assumes no responsibility. She said, “We don't have the staff to accommodate them, so then, of course, the violence has increased. They come in one way and some of them leave the same way, unfortunately.”

However, the hospital is not budging on their offer that stands \$2 per hour below the industry standards stating, “The strike will be about money, not patient safety. The SEIU's demands far exceed the hospital's current economic reality and eliminate our ability to provide wage equity for all hospital employees, including union and nonunion.”

After rejecting the union's counteroffer on Monday afternoon, Loretto management released a statement to *WGN Chicago* news, writing, “We have submitted proposals to address the SEIU's demands for more competitive wages, recruitment and retention, short staffing, and additional holiday. In some classifications, the SEIU is demanding more than 20 percent wage increases when longevity is included. If union members strike, it is solely because they want an impractical first-year wage increase.”

It remains unclear what the counteroffer may have been, but the intransigent position taken by management should come as no surprise. The hospital has the money to bring on temporary workers to staff positions held by striking employees but it is calculating these costs will be more than recouped through the concessions it gets from the union.

Built exactly 100 years ago, Loretto, known then as Austin Hospital, sits in the Southwest of Austin neighborhood adjacent to Columbus Park, a predominately black neighborhood and a Democratic Party stronghold. With close to 100,000 residents and 36,000 households, it is the third largest neighborhood by population. The household income for 35.5 percent is less than \$25,000 annually and 60 percent make \$50,000 or less. Many of the patients that seek care at Loretto are on Medicaid, the government-sponsored health plan for low-income and disabled Americans, which gives Loretto its safety-net designation.

An increasing number of healthcare workers realize the biggest obstacle to securing good wages and working conditions, and providing the best health care for their patients is the subordination of the healthcare system to corporate profit.

But the SEIU and other unions are aligned with the Democratic Party political establishment, which defends the capitalist profit system, which is depriving millions of the right to high quality care, even as they find billions for tax cuts to big business and for war.

The SEIU bureaucracy is seeking to defuse the tensions of healthcare workers and push through a concessionary deal that will leave workers in the lurch without addressing any of the main issues that frustrate health care workers everywhere—appropriate safe staffing and wages commensurate with the massive inflationary pressures that see household debt for the working class rising.

To prevent the sellout of the strike, Loretto hospital workers should build a rank-and-file strike committee to outline their own demands and fight to expand the struggle to healthcare and other workers throughout the city and region.



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