

Loretto Hospital strike in Chicago at a critical turning point

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Are you a Loretto Hospital worker? Fill out the form at the end of the article, to get more information about establishing a rank-and-file strike committee.

The strike of about 200 unionized health care workers, including respiratory and radiology technicians, mental health and behavioral healthworkers, patient transporters, emergency room technicians and housekeeping workers, at Loretto Hospital entered its second week Monday. The hospital is a safety-net facility with a very high number of Medicaid and uninsured patients located in the large, working class Austin neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago.

After reports that negotiations had “stalled,” Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson and local and state Democrats have intervened to press for a rapid end to the strike. This was praised by Service Employees International Union (SEIU), with SEIU representative Anne Igoe saying Tuesday, “Thanks to intervention from the mayor’s office, we did receive a proposal from management. The union bargaining committee was able to provide what we consider a fair counter that again moves the parties incredibly close, within \$40,000.”

Igoe acknowledged, however, “management continues to insist on limiting seniority-based increases and increases to the minimum. Right now, they’re spending about \$200,000 a day on temps [on a census of 20 patients]. The amount they’re spending, they could have ended the strike a week ago.”

Loretto and SEIU Healthcare, which has more than 91,000 members in Indiana, Illinois, Missouri and Arkansas, have been in negotiations for more than two months over wages and working conditions. Like healthcare workers everywhere, striking workers are

demanding higher staffing levels to ensure patients can receive safe, appropriate, and timely treatment.

Chronic understaffing has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and continued budget cutting at every level of government. This has created dangers for both patients and staff. At least one patient died earlier this year at Loretto due to inadequate staffing in the emergency department. Workers at Loretto are also routinely subjected to violence from distressed patients.

There is enormous support in the working class for the Loretto workers’ struggle, but the strike is being isolated by the bureaucracies that run SEIU and other city unions, although the conditions they are fighting are to be found in hospitals, plants and warehouses all over the Chicago region, and indeed worldwide.

Lynda, a mental health specialist with close to 20 years at Loretto, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* on the issues in the strike, including low pay, low staffing levels and mandatory overtime. On a proposed pay increase she said, “That will increase a paycheck, but they still are never going to get rid of overtime. They’ve been saying that since I’ve been here almost 20 years. I don’t do overtime. If I have to, I’ll help four hours or so. We get time and a half for overtime and two and half on holidays.”

On the support strikers are receiving from other staff, Lynda said, “The nurses here are coming out and congratulating us. Two of them stopped this morning and talked to me. They said, ‘keep up the fight!’ But see, what they have to realize is we are a small hospital. Not like Northwestern which can sustain probably years without any income. We can’t even sustain a week without additional income. And the CEOs here are making half-million dollars.”

Many Loretto staff work 12-to-16-hour days, six or seven days a week. As in many industries, including

auto manufacturing and food service, wages have gotten so low and living costs so high that companies demand endless hours from small numbers of staff desperate to make ends meet. In essence, the pay is so low, the hospital owns the workers' time.

The Loretto administration claims that workers' demands "exceed the hospital's economic reality," referring mainly to a \$3 million cut to its operating budget over 2022. But a large portion of the tens of millions in federal funding the hospital receives each year is unaccounted for.

In fact, the hospital has been used as a personal financial and medical resource by its executives, local businesspeople and members of the Democratic Party political machine.

In 2022, Loretto chief executive George Miller stepped down, following his operations chief Dr. Anosh Ahmed, amid a COVID-19 vaccine embezzling scandal that funneled doses of vaccine out of the hospital and into the arms of politically connected business people and local judges. It was uncovered by *Block Club Chicago* that Loretto had also paid millions of contract dollars to private companies founded by Ahmed's close friend and business partner, Sameer Suhail.

"The publicly funded hospital paid nearly \$4 million to the three companies in one year alone," and all of the Suhail companies were created around the time Ahmed's tenure at Loretto began. The contract amounts represented about 5 percent of the hospital's total operating budget, according to the report.

One of the politicians who took part in Monday morning press conference with strikers, calling for "civility" and an immediate end to the strike, was Illinois State Representative LaShawn Ford. Until 2021, Ford sat on the board of Loretto Hospital and received campaign funding from Ahmed.

The current acting chair of Loretto's board of trustees is Illinois Senate Majority Leader Kimberly Lightford. According to the Better Government Association watchdog group, in 2021, Sen. Lightford received Caribbean vacations and \$38,000 in contributions from an insurance company owned by the hospital.

Striking workers are demanding transparency on how public resources have been spent. In response to a WSWs reporter's question about what measures were in place to account for the public funding that was stolen from the hospital's budget, Illinois State

Representative Lakeshia Collins admitted that none existed and that she would like "to be in conversation" about regulations and oversight.

But the issues go beyond leadership corruption. The Democrats are spearheading the attack on public health programs even as the state legislature finds endless resources for corporate tax cuts. Lightford and other state legislators recently backed Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker's plans to claw back the limited healthcare benefits for low-income undocumented immigrants aged 42 and older in Cook County.

On the federal level, the Biden administration is slashing funding to vital services even as it pours billions into the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. On August 1, the day the strike began, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services announced cuts to safety net hospitals (known as disproportionate share hospital payments and uncompensated care payments) for 2024 of a staggering \$957 million, more than eight times the initial estimated cut of \$115 million. As of August 1, 47,000 Illinois residents lost their Medicaid coverage when a federal pandemic provision ended.

This important struggle can and must be won. But Loretto workers must take the conduct of the fight out of the hands of SEIU bureaucracy, which supports the bipartisan program of austerity. Instead, workers should form a rank-and-file strike committee to outline their own demands and prevent the sell out of their strike. This committee should turn to the real allies of striking workers: in the hospitals and clinics, at UPS, at Ford and other auto companies, and among other private and public sector workers. This is the force that must be mobilized to win this fight.

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