

Nursing home workers strike in Detroit suburbs

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More than 250 workers from three nursing homes in the Metro Detroit area have been on strike since October 10 and October 11. All three nursing homes are owned by Optalis Healthcare, a division of Optalis Management Solutions.

The facilities on strike are Four Seasons in Westland, Greenfield in Royal Oak, and Fountain Bleu in Livonia. With a combined 396 beds, these nursing homes represent only a small portion of a multimillion-dollar for-profit health system. In 2019, the only year on record, Optalis owned 15 facilities with 3,000 employees and made more than \$200 million in revenue per year.

That same year, Optalis received a \$109.8 million loan to purchase four nursing home facilities in the Detroit area, though it is not clear if any of the four facilities on strike were part of that deal.

The workers demands mirror those of other healthcare workers around the country: safe staffing, decent wages, and improved benefits.

“I’ve been here for 27 years,” one Greenfield worker told the WSWs, “and I’m making \$18.00 an hour. Starting wages are \$14.00 an hour and we’re asking for \$2.50 an hour more. They want to give us 50 cents—it’s an insult—the wages are already an insult!”

“Now the center is making us take our tent down—again. First it was because we set it up on their property but the church [next door to GRC] let us set it up on theirs. Now the Center pressured the church into making us take it down again. But we’re staying out here whether it rains or not, they can’t intimidate us.”

She continued, “We want the two sick days back that they took away from us in the last two-year contract. We had twelve, now we have 10. We want lower health insurance rates, we want Juneteenth off. But it isn’t just about money, we want to be treated with some dignity.”

The impact of understaffing was made clear when last year, two nurses were expected to handle all 70 residents

by themselves on nearly all shifts. On the evening shift, there were only three CNA’s on duty.

The Greenfield facility, which has a nursing staff turnover rate of 54 percent, has a Medicare rating of 1 out of 5 stars for health inspections, and in the past three years it has received 22 health citations. In 2022, the facility was assessed three federal fines amounting to \$75,550.

The turnover rates at the other two facilities are similarly abysmal, almost 45 percent at Four Seasons overall and 52 percent for registered nurses. At Fountain Bleu, the nursing staff turnover rate is a staggering 64.6 percent.

Angela Davenport, a dietary worker of 5 years at Fountain Bleu, told the SEIU, “Instead of paying us the back pay we won through our case with the National Labor Relations Board, Fountain Bleu is paying hundreds of dollars per hour to lawyers who refuse to negotiate a fair contract with us. This is outrageous – we’ve been going back and forth for close to 5 years. It’s time to take action and win a contract that respects workers at Fountain Bleu.”

The strategy of the SEIU against Optalis is to appeal to management and capitalist politicians. They have allowed workers at Fountain Bleu to work for five years without a contract, with no evidence of strike action before now. The idea that management would suddenly turn around and meet workers’ demands after five years is absurd. On their website, SEIU Healthcare Michigan encourages everyone to “bring people, coffee, pizza, water, snacks, and solidarity.”

Notably, the SEIU does not fight for decent wages but, as they put it, “competitive wages.” This means merely bringing salaries up to the poverty levels offered at other nursing homes in the area.

The SEIU welcomed Democratic representative and Democratic Socialists of America member Rashida Tlaib

present at the picket at Four Seasons on October 10. Tlaib made a brief speech consisting of platitudes and an empty promise that the union will negotiate a contract that meets all their demands. As the strikes continue, workers must be warned: all these promises are empty. The Democrats along with the Republicans are one hundred percent behind a health care system that puts profits first.

To carry their fight forward, workers must take the struggle out of the hands of the SEIU bureaucracy. Nursing home workers have powerful allies throughout the country and throughout the world. Recently, a coalition of unions including the SEIU's United Healthcare Workers, called a three-day strike, sending workers back to work without a contract.

The way forward for workers is not a series of isolated strikes. Workers must take the struggle into their own hands by building rank-and-file committees that can fight for health care that cares for people instead of capitalist owners reaping millions.

The striking nursing home workers are part of a growing wave of working class struggles across the globe, which include ongoing strikes in the US auto industry, which is centered in Detroit, as well as Michigan Blue Cross Blue Shield workers.

“My children’s father works at Stellantis,” a worker said. “If his plant goes out, then we’re both out on strike. It’s hard enough having enough money for things. With what they pay us we can barely survive as it is. If his plant goes out it’s going to be us deciding which bills are going to get paid and which ones aren’t.”

Overhearing this, another worker said, “That’s already how it is on our salaries, which bills to pay and which bills not to pay.”

“Yeah but we have to fight,” the first worker responded.

The other agreed. “They’re paying the agency nurses who crossed our picket line \$30.00 an hour, it’s like a slap in the face to us.”



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