

Form Rank-and-File Committees! Workers must take control of their struggle!

Striking healthcare workers in Burbank, California sent back to work without a contract

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Seven hundred healthcare workers at Providence St. Joseph Medical Center in Burbank, California, are ending today a five day Unfair Labour Practice (ULP) strike that began on Monday. The 700 healthcare workers are members of the Service Employees International Union-United Healthcare Workers West (SEIU-UHW), which consists of EMTs, lab technicians, phlebotomists, patient transporters, EVS workers and other professions.

This strike took place in the context of a wave of strikes by healthcare workers against declining living standards, abusive working conditions, chronic understaffing and burnout made worse by the coronavirus pandemic. Earlier this month, 1,500 healthcare workers in Southern California struck at St. Francis Medical Center and three other California medical facilities run by Prime Healthcare. This came right after the largest healthcare strike in US history when 75,000 Kaiser launched a three day strike. The Kaiser healthcare workers struggle is now being undermined by the attempt to push through a sell out contract by the Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of striking Providence workers during the strike.

Leah is a monitor tech in a stroke unit and has been doing her job for twenty years. Her main job is to monitor thirty two patients who are attached to a heart monitor. When asked why Providence healthcare workers are striking, she explained:

“We are striking because of the fact that we have been mistreated for a long time and all the injustice that has been going on in the hospital... We lost a lot of employees because of COVID and they never really recruited more people to work for Providence, so a majority of the time, especially our CNAs, we are short staffed. One CNA, on a good day, takes 32 patients. We are supposed to have three CNAs for a floor, but sometimes we have two with sixteen patients each.

“We have pleaded to HR and said, ‘Listen, we cannot have these types of staffing issues in the hospital, it’s not good for the patients’. It’s not just about the floor itself, we are also short staffed in EVS. We are also short staffed in some other departments. A majority of the workers that work in the unit are the ones being affected and mostly the patient care is being affected.

“Luckily we have a lot of good nurses that are willing to help us, and that kind of alleviates the stress from the CNAs, but you have to understand, they also have their own patients. How are they going to be able to take care of their patients if they are helping the CNAs?

“The major demand that we have is for the hospital to give us proper staffing... With the low wages they are providing and saying that ‘it is a competitive salary,’ that’s a lie, I’m sorry... If you notice, after COVID, everything went up. Everything went up, not just the gas, everything -- food, clothing, all the expenses that we have. And if we don’t do that, how are we going to be able to afford all these things?

“But because of the low wages they’re offering, nobody wants to stay. Especially the CNAs. They’ll do the orientation, but once they realize all the hard work they have to do, they leave. They don’t even stay for over three months. So what good does it do if you’re already understaffed, and we couldn’t retain anybody, so what’s the issue here?

“Well a majority of us have to get a second job to make ends meet. Especially the EVS workers, and the CNAs too. But especially the EVS workers. They are making fifteen dollars an hour. How are you going to be able to provide food for your family while making that amount of money? And they work as hard as the CNAs. They have to clean thirty or forty rooms in one day... And they have to get another job so they can afford their rent, food and the other expenses they have to provide for their family.”

Leah added that she believed the strike should unite with the strike of screen actors taking place just across street from St. Joseph Providence picketlines as well as other industries, “Well, I think it’s good that they’re [SAG-AFTRA] doing this for a purpose... We all have the same issues, like understaffing, low wages, and the hospitals and other companies are not willing to work with us to have a bargain in good faith. So we can correct the issues and we can solve the issues that we’re having.”

Across the street were SAG-AFTRA members picketing the Walt Disney Studios and workers are beginning to unite the two struggles. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to **Prince** and **Cheer**. Prince is a member of SAG-AFTRA who joined the hospital workers picket line, he explained, “I’m striking today at Disney, but I’ve struck at Warner Bros., Paramount, all the major studios.”

Prince explained, “We are striking over the AI issue and profit sharing for streaming... They don’t want to share revenue for streaming, they don’t want to share AI, which is our images... being able to use our images from different projects without being able to ask our permission... It’s not going to happen.”

Cheer, a respiratory therapist of 15 years, said “I’m striking in support of my sisters and brothers.” He added, “And on our side for medical workers, it’s short staffing the patient care because you can’t take care of patients unless you have workers. And the cost of living is ridiculous. Without making a living wage, it’s impossible.”

As to the connection between their struggles and the war in Gaza, Prince said, “Well, there’s definitely a labor movement now, and there is a movement by people to empower themselves against the big corporations, against the big dollars, and that’s producing killing and war. So there’s a connection to that and homelessness and different ways to kill people. It’s resulting in mass deaths.”

Cheer said, “What unites us is the people. You can’t have movies without actors, you don’t have a hospital if there’s nobody there. It’s same thing during COVID because the pandemic affected everybody, and it still affects us today.”

Prince stated, “It’s capitalism. I’m an actor, and I go to urgent care at St. Joseph Providence Hospital here. It’s a wonderful, beautiful hospital, and it means a lot to me. Maybe it’s a coincidence that I happen to be here, but this is the hospital I go to and they take care of you. This is a hospital that serves the community. I live in Burbank and North Hollywood, and here’s a hospital that’s there for us. What are we doing? How are they out here not being able to make a living, having livable wages? That’s ridiculous!”

Jesse, a nursing assistant who has worked at Providence for four years, told reporters, “We’re striking for better working conditions and better pay. We get paid less compared to other hospitals in Los Angeles County. We get paid the same as McDonald’s, and they get paid more than us, basically... We’re living here paycheck to paycheck just to sustain our life. Without two to three jobs, we would end up becoming homeless. We cannot afford anything here.”

“Taking care of 30 patients is impossible, because we have little resources. The nurses are busy as well, we’re busy and there are delays, and it’s affecting the quality care of the hospital, the patients, everybody. And it’s for everybody. It’s not for us, it’s for everybody, and for the people we are taking care of.”

Erick has worked in the Dietary Department for 16 years. “We worked hard during COVID, and we didn’t get anything. We just got a T-shirt and a ‘heroes’ welcome placard. During those times when everybody was scared to get out, we were here. We are doing our job. We were trying to help patients. We were giving care as much as we can, but we didn’t get anything from the hospital. They gave us some free food, and that’s it... We weren’t well compensated at that time, and now they’re giving us this contract that’s not even decent for a family of five or six.”

“With this economy, everything is so expensive, especially the gas. Before I was able to save some money from my paycheck. Now I have to get some money from my savings in order for me to cope.”

“My kids are 25, 21, 17, 12 and 3 years old. I’m helping my oldest with college expenses. Good thing she’s got lots of scholarships. She’s a good student so that’s a big help.”

“With the cost of food, oh God! I have three teenagers, and they eat like construction workers!”

“The screen actors have been picketing [across the street] for over a month now. And we’re also waiting to stay out for a month just to get

what you want, to get what’s right for us.”

Mick told the WSWS, “I’m also in Radiology, but mainly in ER. And there are days when there’s only one tech for the whole hospital for the night. And there are three buildings plus the ER. So you get pulled everywhere, and there’s only so much you can do. So the ratio is, I don’t know. I’ve lost count. You have to go to an ICU, another ICU, then NICU (neonatal ICU), another building, and then you have the ER, and you have to take care of all of them.”

“I’ve worked here over a year, but I’ve worked a total of about four years in the medical field. If you’re good at your job, they give you more work, instead of giving out the work to more people to spread out the wealth. Sometimes there’s supposed to be two people overnight, but if one calls out, then it’s just you. There should be a buffer. It’s just you, and the whole hospital suffers. And you have to do one patient at a time, it takes time, one after another, and you’re trying not to make mistakes.”

Healthcare workers are determined to fight, but are confronted with not only St. Joseph Providence administrators, but the SEIU-UHW bureaucracy which is intent on getting workers back on the job and pushing through a concessions contract.

This strike has been limited from the start by its designation as an Unfair Labor Practice strike, limiting the workers to raising “non-economic” demands. This is a similar tactic used in the recent Kaiser strike, which was also a ULP strike limited to only three days.

The SEIU is one of the largest unions in the United States. It is controlled by a massive bureaucratic apparatus tied to the Democratic party, funneling \$63.5 million to political campaigns mostly for Democrats last year. The Democratic party oversees vast inequality in the state of California alone which it runs from top to bottom. At the federal level, the Biden administration has attacked the right to strike while fomenting war in Ukraine, the Middle East and against China.

The Democratic Party has also adopted the devastating and homicidal herd immunity policy just as aggressively as Donald Trump’s administration, which dropped all COVID-19 mitigation measures, the cost of which has disproportionately cost the lives of healthcare workers

In order to win their demands for concrete staffing in their contract and significant wage gains, healthcare workers must form rank and file committees that are politically independent of the union bureaucracy and both major political parties.

Rank and file committees will unite healthcare workers across the nation and world, collaborating with other essential sections of the working class such as the powerful strikes by writers and actors, and hotel workers which are taking place. The building of this network of committees, democratically run by workers themselves, must determine staffing in the hospitals and fight to end the subordination of patient care to profit.



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