

Prime Healthcare victimizes 7 workers as struggle by Southern California healthcare workers against understaffing continues

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26 December 2023

Prime Healthcare fired seven workers last week, including the entire union bargaining team, as the Service Employees International Union-United Healthcare Workers West (SEIU-UHW) began a second five-day Unfair Labor Practices strike in as many months over stalled contract talks at four facilities in Southern California. The main issue remains workers demands for an end to the chronic short-staffing which is driving healthcare workers to the breaking point.

The ULP strike covers about 1,800 workers at St. Francis Medical Center in Lynwood, California, Centinela Hospital Medical Center in Inglewood, Garden Grove Hospital and Medical Center, and Encino Hospital Medical Center.

Most, if not all of those terminated were employed at St. Francis Medical Center. The victimizations are a blatant act of intimidation and must be opposed by all workers. At the same time, by isolating the struggle of Prime Healthcare workers and limiting actions to five-day ULP strikes, the SEIU leadership is leaving workers open to such attacks.

The SEIU-UHW called the second ULP strike after talks with Prime Healthcare broke down on December 4, with the union stating that management had refused to schedule any more meetings. The fired workers included all five members of the SEIU-UHW bargaining team, who, according to previous reports, were recently suspended for presenting demands on short-staffing to management after a rally held outside corporate headquarters in Ontario, California on November 30.

The other two workers included an RN who worked as a telemetry nurse at St. Francis, and Scott Byington, RN, President of the St. Francis Registered Nurses Association (RNA), which represents RNs at St. Francis. Byington released a statement which read, “How shameful for a multi-billion-dollar health care company to intimidate and terminate health care workers who attempt to notify them of ongoing patient safety issues. These are the same health care professionals who cared for their patients during the pandemic when health care workers were scarce. Instead, Prime corporate turns a blind eye to the many poor patient safety issues leading to many witnessed poor patient outcomes disenfranchising the patients, families, and communities.”

It should be noted that RNA just ratified a contract with Prime on December 13. The contract did nothing to address short-staffing and also included below inflation pay rises for the duration of the agreement. After the ratification, chief negotiator Sandra Marques admitted as much when she said, “The improved compensation will assist in recruitment and retention, but the fight for improvement to safe staffing and safe work environments continues.”

She went on, “We hope that the hospital is committed to collaborating with UNAC/UHCP-SFRNA [United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Health Care Professionals-St. Francis Registered Nurses Association] to address and resolve those issues. The St. Francis nurses will continue to fight for our patients and our community, who are deserving of quality care.”

In response to the victimization of the seven workers, the SEIU is attempting to promote illusions in various California Democratic politicians.

Workers cannot wage a successful fight against Prime Healthcare Kaiser or other healthcare conglomerates as long as their struggle is confined within the straitjacket of the SEIU apparatus, which is joined at the hip to the capitalist Democratic Party, which is every bit as beholden to the corporations as the Republicans. What required is to unite healthcare workers from all medical facilities in democratically controlled rank-and-file committees independent of the union tops and the two big business parties. It is only through these committees and by broadening the struggle to workers in every industry, who are facing many of the same issues as healthcare workers, that workers will be able to realize their demands. This requires a socialist strategy aimed at establishing healthcare as a social right and ending the for-profit system of healthcare.

The WSWS spoke to several St Francis workers at the picket lines last week before news of the sackings was released. Workers spoke about the understaffing, especially in regard to nurses, which has a knock-on effect on every other part of the hospital staff.

Jay, who is a respiratory therapist at St. Francis said, “It’s

crazy. The hospital has an issue with short-staffing. And it's not just been crazy but over exhausting as well on everyone.

"It's been a tiring time and exhausting time for everyone, since it's also the holidays as well and there have been a lot of call-offs. It's just staff not coming in to work. They're burnt out. And it just seems that Prime doesn't care.

"You know, it's not just pay, it's the workload, it's staffing. We're not compensated correctly. It's risky too, and it becomes a problem for us and the patients. And yet the owner of Prime is making billions of dollars for himself."

Mark, an ICU (intensive care unit) secretary at St. Francis said that "It's really the nurses who are out of ratio, which affects everybody and especially the patients.

"In our ICU unit, sometimes we don't have any 'breakers' or even the charge nurses will take patients to help.

"And taking our breaks and lunches, the nurses don't have breaks and lunches. I mean, we need another staff member to cover all the patients. We're also working 12 hours a day.

"So, there's at least two days out of the week where there is no ICU secretary because they don't want to hire.

"When there's no ICU secretary, the nurses must get their own equipment. They have to look for whatever they need. It's our job to provide supplies or whatever they need to care for the patients. And we have to set up everything, so that they're ready to go the next morning."

Another ICU secretary said, regarding conditions at the hospital, "It's a team. You have to play as a team. And it feels like Prime is not letting us have it. It almost feels like they're dividing us as well.

"We just want the fair raises. We deserve it. We've been on a freeze before Prime even bought us. The economy's gone up. Everything has. We haven't had a raise in more than three years. Our pay is very low. And then they don't want to give us PTO (personal time off)."

When asked about the ongoing Israeli genocide in Gaza, including the bombing of hospitals, Mark said "I know they're being bombed every day. It's sad to see that the Israelis are bombing innocent people, hospitals, communities, and schools and all that."

When our reporter told him about the campaign of the Socialist Equality Party to mobilize workers to stop the shipment of weapons to Israel, he said, "I agree with that. I think the people are the ones that have the power, all the people that take control of stuff like that. Without the people, we have nothing."

Our reporters also spoke with Carol, who works in the lab. She said, "We're on strike because of the unfair wages. I feel like everyone here deserves better pay, especially for the work we do here. A lot of us do overtime because we're short-staffed. I just feel like we should all be getting paid what we deserve."

She said that she works days, and while their staffing levels are adequate, "the night shift is very, very short. We're always

short. So, when the day shift comes in, we have to pick up their workload because there was no one at night. So now we have to do the night shift work and morning shift work too.

"It affects the patients because in the lab, we draw blood. And say if the patients leave their lab work done, we don't have a phlebotomist at night to draw their blood, so they won't get results until morning shift and we don't come in until 6 a.m., so for a whole eight-hour shift, no blood work. That's very dangerous for a patient, they need their results."

Our reporters talked to two discharge planners who were on the picket. One said "Well, we started like this year, but I see the conditions the hospitals are in, and I see how the LPNs and everybody else are really stressed out because they're so understaffed ... The LPNs take on roles that I don't even think it's appropriate for them to take on. Such as having to administer medication when they're not supposed to."

They described how the understaffing affects their positions, "The nurse is overworked and they can't talk to the patients, the doctors don't want to talk to them because they're busy and so we have to explain to them something that we're not certified to explain. And sometimes I don't think it's safe to even discharge that patient, but it's what we're told to do and what we have to do and have to arrange it."

When asked to comment on the ongoing genocide in Gaza, one stated, "On the political side, I don't agree with the way the United States is backing Israel. I think it's very despicable, but on the health worker side, I just feel for them because I just know how much they want to help and provide to these patients, but they can't. It's just horrible. Seeing the videos and seeing the doctors literally have that mile-long stare that usually people at war have because they are at war; PTSD stare. And it's horrible. I hate it."



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