

New York's home health aides wage hunger strike to abolish 24-hour shifts

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About 24 home health aides in New York City recently waged a hunger strike to demand that the City Council vote on a bill to abolish 24-hour shifts.

The hunger strike reflects not only how intolerable the shifts are, but also how desperate the workers have become. Such shifts are physically and emotionally punishing, and workers are paid for only 13 of the 24 hours that they work. Many of the home health aides have been demanding action from the City Council for almost 10 years.

A bill to eliminate 24-hour shifts for home health aides was introduced in the City Council about a year and a half ago, but Council Speaker Adrienne Adams never brought it to the floor for a vote. While claiming to support workers' demands for better job conditions, Adams argues that because home health care is reimbursed by Medicaid, the issue must be decided by the state, not the city.

During the five-day hunger strike, the workers rallied outside City Hall. Home health aide Guihua Song addressed one of the rallies through an interpreter. "It's not that we don't cherish our health. We know that hunger striking harms the body and causes great damage to us, but we have no choice," she said, according to *The Villager*. "Working 24 hours a day for a long time, our bodies have been tortured, broken down and full of aches and pains. We cannot care for our children and families." The strike ended on March 25 without any action from the City Council.

Home health aides care for elderly clients and those with disability or chronic illnesses. The workers help their clients perform daily activities such as washing, dressing, preparing meals and attending medical appointments. The job often requires lifting patients without assistance. Many home health aides, who are predominantly women and immigrants, develop work-

related injuries or deformities.

State law provides for eight unpaid hours of sleep and three hours for meals. But in practice, breaks are not enforced, and the workers are often unable to rest or eat. Some have reported suffering insomnia and deteriorating eyesight. Home health aides may be assigned as many as five 24-hour shifts in a row.

In 2022, Councilmember Christopher Marte introduced a bill that would limit the shifts that home care employers can assign to 12 hours within a 24-hour period. Hence, two workers could each be assigned a 12-hour shift to provide 24-hour care for a client.

Many home health aides are members of 1199SEIU, which initially opposed Marte's bill. The union changed its position when the bill's 50-hour limit on the home-care workweek was increased to 56 hours. Moreover, officials of 1199SEIU did not attend a rally that the hunger strikers held in front of City Hall. These acts demonstrate that the union bureaucracy is not interested in protecting workers' rights. It is more concerned about maintaining its cozy and mutually beneficial relationships with the healthcare companies.

During the initial hearing on the bill, the chairs of the state Senate and Assembly Health Committees argued that to avoid potential gaps in coverage, revised regulations related to home health aides must be passed in the state government along with changes in Medicaid funding. But the state legislature, which is dominated by Democrats, has not pursued the issue since Marte introduced his bill.

Members of the City Council, with an even greater Democratic majority, suggested that passing Marte's bill in the Council would provoke the state to take up the issue. But like the state legislature, the Council has also failed to act, leaving workers to continue suffering through unbearable workloads.

Yayun Li, one of the hunger strikers, told the news program *Democracy Now!*, “For many of us working 24-hour workdays, we are forced to work these kinds of shifts, because if we refuse, then a company won’t assign us work...Only 24 hours or very few hours. So, we really need to stop this kind of practice.”

Jerry White, the Socialist Equality Party’s candidate for US vice president, posted a X/Twitter statement supporting the home health aides. It read in part:

The New York City home health aides, who recently engaged in hunger strike, have shown tremendous courage and justified anger in their fight to abolish 24-hour shifts. They deserve the support of all workers.

But bitter experience has shown that appeals to the Democrats are futile...The Democrats speak for the financial and corporate elite whose interests are irreconcilable with those of the working class. Together with the Republicans, the Democrats have dismantled all efforts to end the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed more than 1,000 Americans each week since late August. The Democrats have also joined the Republicans’ filthy campaign of anti-immigrant bigotry.

Most criminally, Biden continues to deliver bombs and missiles to Israel for its genocidal war against the Palestinians and campaign of ethnic-cleansing in Gaza. Just a few weeks ago, Biden signed a bipartisan government spending bill that included \$825 billion for the US military--and both parties claim there is no money for public health, education, decent wages and other vital interests of the working class! Regardless of the risks to human survival, both parties are escalating US imperialism's confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia and China and are seeking to make the working class pay for it.

The Democrats depend on the labor bureaucrats who run 1199SEIU and other unions to suppress workers’ opposition. That is why home health aides must form rank-and-file committees under their own democratic control to unite with every section of the working class

to oppose war and capitalist exploitation.

At bottom, the fight against 24-hour shifts is a fight against the system of for-profit healthcare. Only the replacement of capitalism with socialism can guarantee workers’ rights and provide free, high-quality healthcare for all as a basic right.



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