

# Nurses strike at Geisinger hospitals in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

Our correspondent  
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Some 800 nurses at Geisinger Health System facilities in the Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, area have launched a five-day strike that started Monday morning. The nurses, members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU), cite low pay, overwork, short staffing and exorbitant healthcare costs.

Negotiations, which began in November, have failed to obtain real concessions from Geisinger.

The nurses have been working without a contract since January 31. SEIU Healthcare Pennsylvania, which represents tens of thousands of healthcare workers across the state, gave Geisinger a ten-day strike notice on February 7, an interval mandated by federal labor law.

The facilities affected by the strike are all in and near Wilkes-Barre, in Pennsylvania's Luzerne County, formerly a major coal mining area. They include Geisinger Wyoming Valley Medical Center in Plains, Geisinger South in Wilkes-Barre and Geisinger Healthplex CenterPoint in Pittston.

Geisinger Health System, headquartered in Danville, Pennsylvania, serves 3 million patients annually at 10 regional hospitals. In 2023, it boasted revenue of \$7.7 billion and net income of \$366.6 million.

Geisinger was acquired that same year by Risant Health, which is, in turn, controlled by industry leader Kaiser Permanente. Kaiser's takeover of Geisinger was "the first step on its ambitious plan to form a multisystem, multiregional value-based care organization" that can "achieve total revenue of between \$30 billion and \$35 billion," according to one industry journal.

"Value-based care" is a corporate euphemism for healthcare based on "outcome" and "performance metrics" for hospitals, workers and patients. The underlying metric is a demand to scale back services

and reduce costs, thereby incentivizing the selection of low-risk patients.

On acquiring Geisinger and North Carolina-based Cone Health, Kaiser CEO Greg A. Adams outlined his vision.

"The work that we've done, as we've looked at health systems, shows that we're able to improve their cost structure by 2 percent to 3 percent," Adams said. "I think that's conservative. Part of it is what the value-based platform does. We're estimating that to be about 60 percent of the cost reduction. The other 40 percent is really related to our enterprise and what we're able to do in terms of shared services."

Adams takes home \$15 million-\$17 million per year for such cost-cutting, despite Kaiser Permanente being dubbed a "non-profit" healthcare provider. It employs roughly 73,000 nurses across the US, along with 25,000 physicians, and counted revenue total at \$100 billion in 2023.

In reality, nurses at Geisinger face not only Kaiser Permanente, but the union that nominally represents them, the SEIU. In addition to providing abundant notice of the strike, the SEIU has restricted the strike to only a five-day walkout.

With ample time to prepare, and knowing full well that the nurses will stay out for only five days, Geisinger representatives boasted to the media that the strike was doing little to disrupt operations.

"We have activated a contingency plan that includes bringing in additional staff on a temporary basis so these critical healthcare resources in Luzerne County can operate business as usual to continue delivering high-quality care to everyone in need during the strike," a spokesperson said in a statement. "In addition to nurses, other members of the clinical team, including physicians and advanced practice providers, will care

for our patients as they always have.”

The SEIU union representing the nurses, Healthcare Pennsylvania, bargains for roughly 45,000 health care workers in the state alone. Though these workers face the same conditions as the nurses at Geisinger—overwork, underpay, spiraling health care costs and inadequate staffing—the SEIU has done nothing to expand the struggle. SEIU workers even in nearby Scranton remain on the job.

In fact, healthcare workers across the country, and internationally, confront a common enemy: A capitalist profit system that puts profits above health. In the US, nurses will soon confront the fallout from the Trump administration’s gutting of funding for Medicare and Medicaid—the strings pulled by the world’s richest man, Elon Musk—as well as its broader attack on science and medicine.

In a statement, Geisinger alluded to this reality as the basis for what it calls its “competitive and sustainable” demands on pay and benefits for nurses: “Healthcare systems nationwide are faced with increasingly high operating costs and poor reimbursement—particularly from the Federal Government—and Geisinger is no exception,” the statement read.

The meaning is clear. No struggle of healthcare workers can succeed in isolation from a broader working class offensive that puts social needs above profit.

Visiting the picket lines in Luzerne County, reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* made this case to workers, who braved sub-zero wind chills to demonstrate, many with home-made signs. The WSWS distributed a statement on striking nurses in Oregon, pointing to the need to build rank-and-file committees to coordinate struggles, as well as a recent statement on the Trump administration’s attack on healthcare and science.

Workers readily agreed that healthcare workers must unite and broaden their struggles, and received the statement on Oregon nurses with particular interest.

Multiple nurses spoke to the WSWS about the conditions they face at Geisinger.

Chrissy, a registered nurse with 12 years’ experience, told the WSWS that the inability to hire and hold on to nurses due to low pay and overwork were creating problems for safety in the hospital. “There are about 300 unfilled positions just in this hospital,” she said.

Like several other nurses, she stressed the inequity of working for a major health care provider and yet having to pay unaffordable health insurance bills.

“We have nurses who pay \$700 or more per month for health insurance,” Chrissy said.

Madison, an RN with four years’ experience, echoed this statement. She said she knows of nurses with families who pay as much as \$800 per month for health insurance through Geisinger.

Several nurses spoke about a lack of competitiveness in pay by Geisinger. Michelle, an RN with 24 years’ experience, said that a recent college graduate from a nursing program can earn as much as she does in their first year working at different hospitals.

The level of stress and the decline in staffing can be traced back to a starting point with the COVID pandemic, one nurse said. Called “healthcare heroes” by the hospitals and politicians, nurses were never rewarded for their services.

“We’ve been working our guts out, especially since COVID, where people just walked out each day,” another nurse, Lucy Rettke, told a local media outlet. “I care about my patients and they need nurses.”



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