

US healthcare workers union president ousted by opposition slate following corruption scandal

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On May 4, George Gresham, President of 1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East (UHWE) was decisively defeated by Yvonne Armstrong, a longtime and high-ranking member of his staff. Gresham, president since 2007, was ousted following the eruption of a scandal triggered by revelations of massive corruption, which prompted the House Committee on Education and the Workforce to request a federal investigation.

The scandal, triggered by an extensive exposé in Politico, lifts the lid on how the union bureaucracy as a whole lives—its corrupt appetites, its essentially parasitic and hostile relationship to the workers they claim to represent and their deep ties to management and the capitalist parties. It underscores that the bureaucracy cannot be reformed, but must be overthrown, and replaced with rank-and-file committees which give workers themselves real democratic control.

This is posed with special sharpness given ongoing or planned strikes by UHWE members across the northeastern United States. This includes strikes by nursing home workers in New York and Connecticut and by workers at Butler Hospital in Rhode Island. Workers are fighting against poverty wages which are a small fraction of the bloated salaries of the union officialdom.

The Politico article revealed Gresham, who made \$300,000 per year as union president, has carried out sustained embezzlement of union funds. Most recently, \$60,000 in union funds was spent to cover travel and lodging for Gresham's daughter, who accompanied the ailing union president as a so-called caregiver.

Significantly, his daughter holds a management position at Montefiore Health System in the Bronx, where many UHWE members work. Gresham's decades-long ties to the hospital administration run deep enough that a hospital garden was named after him.

This corruption deeply implicated the Democratic Party, which has long specialized in using the services of the

bureaucracy to suppress the class struggle. Carmen Perez, head of the Democratic Party-aligned nonprofit Gathering for Justice, remained on the union payroll for over a decade, receiving over \$1 million in "pay" with no defined responsibilities. The union also covered the cost of her group's \$300,000-per-year penthouse office space for several years.

In 2023, Jesse Jackson, the ex-civil rights leader and Democratic Party factotum, was handed \$50,000 in union money for a "legacy award" that functioned as a bailout for medical bills. Gresham's political circle included high-profile Democrats like Bill de Blasio and Rev. Al Sharpton. Gresham also supported former Governor Mario Cuomo in an aborted mayoral run.

Last year, Gresham was named by *City & State* as the most influential labor leader in the state of New York.

Gresham and other top bureaucrats live in a different world than the workers they claim to represent. In the Butler Hospital strike, workers are calling for a wage hike to at least \$25 per hour—still \$14 below a living wage, according to statistics from MIT.

A review of UHWE contracts—covering New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Maryland, D.C. and Florida—shows wage increases barely above inflation. The average inflation rate during Gresham's tenure was just over 2.5 percent, while wage gains averaged approximately 3 percent. Employers retained the upper hand, and staff ratios remained inadequate.

During the worst of the coronavirus pandemic, workers were left on the job without proper protections, endangering both themselves and patients. Many workers are also immigrants, now living in fear under the Trump administration's illegal deportations.

Gresham's downfall came primarily due to declining support within the apparatus. Tensions inside UHWE escalated in late 2024, as Gresham's health declined and his allies began to jump ship. A majority of the union's 260

staffers voted to join the Washington-Baltimore News Guild, citing a climate of “fear and retaliation.”

Gresham’s replacement, Yvonne Armstrong, and her second-in-command Veronica Turner-Biggs, reportedly tried to convince Gresham to retire into a ceremonial “president emeritus” role. When he refused, they challenged him in the union election. In early 2025, they formed the Members First Unity Slate (MFUS).

While casting themselves as “reformers,” they are in fact career officials. Armstrong served under Gresham for 17 years in top roles, including as senior executive vice president and head of the long-term care division. Turner-Biggs led the Downstate Health Systems unit. These two “reformers” stood idle in 2020 as COVID-19 devastated healthcare workers in New York nursing homes and hospitals. With inadequate PPE, workers endured brutal shifts while bodies piled high in refrigerator trucks.

Significantly, this is the first contested presidential election for UHWE, a massive SEIU local with more than 450,000 members across the eastern United States, since 1989, the first year of the George Bush Sr. administration. This underscores the fact that the unions are run as bureaucratic dictatorships, where power is passed on to hand-picked successors and the real interests and opinions of workers are systematically excluded.

Generally speaking, the election of popes (of which there have been four since 1989) are more contentious affairs than the selection of the bureaucracy’s top leader. That an election took place at all at UHWE appears to be more due to the failure of the bureaucracy to put together a viable plan of succession.

The election itself revealed deep alienation felt by the workers for the bureaucracy. No doubt, every vote for Armstrong was a vote against Gresham, which registered deep anger over the union’s record of sellouts. But the primary form in which this alienation expressed itself was in mass abstention.

Just under 40,000 eligible voters cast ballots in a union with 450,000 members on the East Coast, around the same level as the turnout at the 2022 United Auto Workers election, which, at 9 percent, was the lowest turnout of any national election in the history of the American unions.

Like UHWE, the UAW election took place following a massive corruption scandal which involved much of its top leadership, including two former presidents. For decades, the auto companies funneled millions into the pockets of top union officials through various means in order to keep them “fat, dumb, and happy,” as one auto executive put it.

Also like in UHWE, the election produced a new president, Shawn Fain, who is a career top official involved in numerous sellout contracts. Fain presented himself as a

reformer with the support of Unite All Workers for Democracy. But Fain, who is also reportedly under investigation for illegal campaign contributions, has pushed through new contracts which have resulted in thousands of layoffs, following a toothless auto strike in 2023.

Worse, he is openly aligning with Trump’s “America First” policies, supporting the would-be fascist dictator and dividing workers in the US against their brothers and sisters in other countries.

The experience under Fain is a warning as to what UHWE members can expect under the new administration. Groups like MFUS function to bolster illusions in the union bureaucracy and prevent the emergence of open rebellion from the rank and file, in order to prepare the next round of betrayals.

In the 2022 election, Mack Trucks worker and socialist Will Lehman ran against Fain on a platform to abolish the UAW bureaucracy entirely—and despite rampant voter suppression, over which he has filed a lawsuit against the Department of Labor, 5,000 workers cast votes for him.

The growing class struggle across the United States must take the form of a rebellion against this corrupt apparatus. In addition to the strikes by UHWE members, nurses at Long Beach Medical Center in southern California launched a strike, and hundreds of New Jersey Transit engineers shut down one of the largest commuter rail systems in the country this past weekend. But the Long Beach strike was limited to only one day, and the NJ Transit strike was shut down by the union bureaucrats, who sent them back to work without having won their demands.

The scandal at the SEIU is the latest confirmation that a genuine fight for better wages, healthcare, and democratic rights necessitates new forms of struggle, rank-and-file committees, to transfer power back from the bureaucrats to the workers.



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