

Lorain County, Ohio family service workers strike enters third week: “We are fighting everyone”

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6 March 2026

Workers for the Lorain County Department of Job and Family Services (JFS) in Ohio are in their third week of a strike for better wages, benefits, and working conditions. The 140 workers—caseworkers, investigators, and social service employees—are members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2192.

Striking workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that they are fighting for better wages and health care and to ensure that they can provide better service to members of the community in need.

Every picketer we spoke with this week described the connection between low wages and their ability to provide services to the community.

Darlene Gray, a caseworker with 23 years of service, explained how low pay prevents JFS from retaining workers.

“We have employees that will start with the agency,” she said. “They’re in training. Then they come out on the floor and realize the amount of work that have to do for the pay they are receiving so they quit.

“We love what we do,” she added. “We actually enjoy helping the community.”

The 140 caseworkers, investigators and social service workers walked off the job February 18 after working since last fall without a contract. Workers at the agency administer many benefits, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or food stamps, Medicaid, childcare assistance, Ohio Works First and Adult Protective Services.

Massive cuts to SNAP, Medicaid and other social services enacted by the Trump administration and passed by Congress have eliminated benefits and placed additional burdens on the backs of the already overworked staff.

Antionetta Russell has 31 years at JFS. She works in

Adult Protective Services, investigating cases of adult abuse.

“The pay is low and the demands are high,” she said. “You can’t keep the ratio of staff that we need. There is a lot of turnover, and the burnout is too high.”

The pay for staff is abysmal. Starting wages are just \$15 to \$18 an hour. A caseworker with over five years’ service told the WSWS that she makes only \$21.26 an hour. This amounts to under \$45,000 a year, or about 70 percent of the average income across the country.

“We are on strike for better wages and health care,” Antionetta continued.

“We haven’t gotten an increase for the past several contracts. The contract rolls over in September. Every time we get a [wage] increase, then in January they increase the medical, so we are always put behind the eight ball.

“We just want to be able to make a living wage and take care of our families. But we want to get back to work so we can take care of our community.”

The strike unfolds against the backdrop of ongoing and massive cuts carried out by both Democrats and Republicans at the local, state and federal levels, leaving millions without basic necessities.

In 1996, the Clinton administration ended entitlement status for both food stamps and welfare—what Clinton referred to as “ending welfare as we know it.” Their replacements, SNAP and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), came with time limits and work requirements, forcing millions off the programs. States were often given waivers to impose still further restrictions.

Over the years, both Democratic and Republican administrations imposed further cuts while granting massive tax cuts and bailouts for the rich.

During 2023 and 2024, the Biden administration ended the last of the COVID benefits. Last year, Congress refused to extend the tax credits for the Affordable Care Act, forcing more than 2 million people off health care and millions more to pay skyrocketing premiums.

Finally, last summer, Congress passed what is referred to as Trump's "big, beautiful bill," which handed massive tax cuts to the rich and corporations while further cutting social programs for the working class and poor.

These cuts placed further burdens on those receiving benefits, forcing tens—if not hundreds—of thousands of these vital programs in Ohio alone. The increased regulations are also placing massive burdens on the already overworked staff at the JFS offices in Lorain and throughout the state.

"The cuts affect the community," said Antionetta. "We have to find the resources for food, housing, to pay their electric bill. A lot of people here don't make much money. A lot of people here qualify for benefits. It is a sad situation, and the medical costs keep increasing and increasing."

Ashton Werling, a program specialist with over 10 years' service, spoke about her mother, who died less than two months ago after battling Long COVID for four years. She was placed on a ventilator December 10, 2021.

"My mom caught COVID in November 2021. She fought for four years. She passed away on January 14th.

"I researched what benefits there are, because obviously we don't have any money to pay for her expenses. With COVID and then her passing, we used all the resources we had. I'm just scrambling trying to get everything together. She fought for so long and I wanted to see she was okay.

"I'm still really emotional, and I'm angry that she had to go through that because of COVID. I was really upset to find out that all the COVID support was cut. I remember giving stuff out for people to pay for funerals and things like that. But not anymore."

One of the specific targets of the budget cuts of the Trump administration, approved by Congress, was the elimination of benefits for immigrant workers in the United States.

Most undocumented immigrants who were not here legally were never allowed federal services, but under the bill immigrants who are here legally as refugees and asylum seekers can no longer receive SNAP, Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

"It was really sad," said Ashton, describing having to tell clients they were being cut off of health insurance.

"We had several people calling in. People who were non-citizens, in the transition to becoming permanent and because of the changes overnight we had to tell them that they were no longer qualified for medical benefits.

"They already didn't qualify for food assistance, and now we had to tell them the medical coverage was over.

"We totally sympathize with all of those people. You don't want to take away their medical. We want everybody to have medical. That was really, really tough to deal with. I mean it was call after call after call. It was just one day, and the state just came in and just started shutting everything down."

"We are fighting everyone. That's what it is, we are fighting everyone," is how Antoinette summed it up.

Will Lehman, rank-and-file autoworker at Mack Trucks in Macungie, Pennsylvania and candidate for UAW president, issued a statement on the strike. "The strike by Lorain County Department of Job and Family Services workers is a warning and a call to action for the entire working class," he said.

"These workers are fighting not only for themselves, but for every family that depends on basic social services—and for every worker being told to accept poverty wages while billionaires and corporations grow richer."

Lehman underscored that the conditions described by JFS workers are "the daily reality for workers everywhere," and that "attacks on workers and attacks on the public are two sides of the same class policy."

Lehman also pointed to the role of the union apparatus in blocking a broader fight: "The UAW bureaucracy is isolating the strike and refusing to call for unified action by Jobs and Family Services workers across Ohio, including those organized by AFSCME, OCSEA and other unions. ... They won't mobilize broader support because they fear a movement of the working class that escapes their control."

Lehman concluded that workers "need rank-and-file committees—independent organizations controlled by workers themselves—to link up across workplaces and industries" and organize a unified counteroffensive in defense of social rights.



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