

“We are not going to be taken for granted anymore.”

Lorain County Job and Family Services strike passes 140 days as federal assault on social programs deepens

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The United Auto Workers continues to isolate the strike by 140 workers at the Lorain County Department of Job and Family Services (JFS) in northeast Ohio. The strike entered its 146th day Monday, making it one of the longest public-sector strikes in the state’s history.

The workers walked out February 18 after months of fruitless negotiations with the county, located 25 miles west of Cleveland. The original bargaining unit included approximately 140 caseworkers, investigators, eligibility specialists and other employees in UAW Local 2192. More than 100 workers reportedly remain on strike, while several have been forced by financial hardship to find other employment.

Despite the determination of the workers, there is no new bargaining session scheduled. Lorain County commissioners continue to insist that their offer of wage increases totaling 12 percent over three years, far below the rise in the cost of living, is their “best and final” proposal.

“They haven’t budged since they gave us their final offer,” Jennifer Verda, a social services worker with more than 29 years of service, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “How is that negotiations?”

Verda said county officials make statements at public meetings about what they claim they are prepared to offer workers, but refuse to put these proposals into a formal agreement.

“They don’t want to talk to us,” she said. “We go to the public meetings. The commissioners will say they are willing to give us this and that. I say, let them put that in writing and we’ll take it. But they never do.”

The workers are seeking better wages, affordable health benefits and measures to address chronic understaffing and the agency’s inability to retain experienced employees. Starting pay for some JFS workers is as little as \$15 to \$18 an hour.

“We are not going to be taken for granted anymore,” Verda said. “We have worked too long and hard for too little. It is time we get what we deserve.”

The strike is a struggle against poverty wages and the destruction of the social services upon which hundreds of thousands of working class residents depend.

“We are fighting for better wages and health benefits,” Verda explained. “We are the lowest-paid JFS workers in the state. All the other counties pay their workers more. Many of the people who work here end up qualifying for benefits themselves. That tells you how low we are paid.”

Health insurance premiums for county workers increased by approximately 50 percent over four years, followed by another 13 percent increase for 2026. Whatever limited wage increases workers received under previous contracts were effectively swallowed up by higher insurance premiums, deductibles and other out-of-pocket expenses.

A worker can therefore receive a nominal raise while taking home less money or being forced to remove a spouse or child from the family health plan. The county’s proposal would preserve this cycle.

County officials have also attacked workers for allegedly receiving too much paid time off, presenting benefits earned through decades of service as an unjustified privilege.

“They say we get too much time off. That is ridiculous,” Verda told the WSWs. “We’ve earned that. You don’t want to go backwards. They have the money to pay us. Look up the number of executive positions they have that are making six-figure salaries.”

The low wages have produced relentless turnover. Experienced workers leave for positions that pay more and impose less emotional strain. Newly hired employees undergo extensive training, encounter overwhelming caseloads and then frequently quit. More than half of the workforce had reportedly been employed for less than two years before the strike.

“We have a high turnover,” Verda said. “Our caseload is growing and they can’t keep people working. Once a new hire sees how much work there is and how little the pay is, they quit.”

Angela Vilagi, a caseworker with more than five years of service, told the WSWs that the length of the strike and the mounting backlog have created enormous uncertainty for workers.

“The issue I worry about personally is the length of time we have been on strike and the fact that the workload will be so overwhelming when we return,” Vilagi said. “Will I be able to handle that pressure?”

These conditions produce consequences throughout the county. JFS workers determine eligibility and process applications for Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP food stamps), childcare assistance and Ohio Works First. They also investigate abuse and neglect through Adult Protective Services and perform other critical functions.

“This is hurting the clients,” Verda said. “They can’t process the applications, do the certifications and investigate the cases. People are having to wait to get their benefits.”

As the strike has continued, county residents have reported long telephone waits, processing mistakes and temporary interruptions in benefits. One recipient told News 5 Cleveland that clerical errors caused his SNAP application to be temporarily denied. Other residents reported delays in obtaining Medicaid coverage and prescriptions.

The Lorain County Free Clinic has experienced increased demand for free medicine and healthcare from residents waiting for their coverage to be processed. County Commissioner Jeff Riddell has acknowledged that the strike aggravated an existing backlog, although county officials have repeatedly attempted to minimize the disruption.

Verda said nursing homes and other community organizations have voiced support for the strikers because they have seen the consequences of the county's refusal to settle.

"We are getting a lot of support from the community," she said. "The nursing homes are supporting us, telling them to pay us and let us do our jobs. Many of their clients aren't getting processed since we're not there."

County officials have sought assistance from neighboring counties and advertised for temporary employees rather than meeting the workers' demands. Management also reportedly offered \$250 bonuses to any members of the bargaining unit who crossed the picket line. These actions make clear that the commissioners' central concern is not the provision of services, but breaking the resistance of the workforce and imposing a precedent for low wages throughout county government.

Vilagi said the commissioners' refusal even to negotiate has caused workers to question whether county officials have any respect for the workforce or the essential services they provide.

"The fact that the commissioners will not even negotiate or come to the table to try to resolve the strike leads me to wonder if this is the job for me," she said. "Do I want to continue to work for people who have no regard for their workers?"

"I feel they have no respect for what we do and how stressful our jobs are. I truly hope this ends soon and we can return to our jobs and help the community members who need assistance."

Workers have maintained the strike through bitter winter weather and extreme summer heat.

"It has been very hard," Verda said. "We started out in the freezing rain and now it is blistering hot. It could take months, but we are going to get what we deserve. I am hoping it will be soon, but you can't tell."

The strike is developing as the federal government imposes the largest attack on Medicaid and food assistance in the programs' history.

Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act, signed into law July 4, 2025, combines trillions of dollars in tax reductions overwhelmingly benefiting corporations and the wealthy with approximately \$911 billion in reduced federal Medicaid spending over a decade. The law also cuts federal SNAP spending by roughly \$186 billion.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates that millions of people will lose health coverage and that an average of 2.4 million people will be removed from SNAP. Ohio is expected to lose approximately \$33 billion in federal Medicaid funding between 2025 and 2034, depending upon how the state responds to the law.

Some attacks have already begun. Effective February 1, Ohio expanded SNAP work requirements to adults through age 64, stripping exemptions from veterans, homeless people and young adults who aged out of foster care, and extending the requirements to parents of children 14 or older. Since March 1, recipients must document at least 80 hours of work, training or other approved activity each month. These rules are deliberately designed to purge eligible people through paperwork, missed notices and reporting failures. Every new restriction creates additional work for JFS employees, who must review documents, send notices, answer appeals and explain to desperate families why their food assistance has been cut off—even as Washington slashes the funding needed to do this work. On October 1, the federal share of SNAP administrative costs falls from 50 to 25 percent, forcing Ohio and its counties to absorb the difference or impose further cuts.

Medicaid recipients face similar attacks. The law imposes work documentation on adults covered through the Medicaid expansion, shortens eligibility periods, increases reviews, restricts retroactive coverage and limits coverage for lawfully present immigrants. Ohio has some 1.4 million SNAP recipients and hundreds of thousands on expanded Medicaid, and the funding cuts threaten rural hospitals, clinics and nursing homes which are already under severe financial pressure.

Responsibility does not rest solely with Trump and the Republicans. For decades, Democratic and Republican administrations have dismantled social programs while transferring immense resources to the corporations, the military and the financial oligarchy. The Clinton administration ended the federal entitlement to cash welfare in 1996. The Biden administration terminated pandemic assistance and carried out the mass removal of millions of people from Medicaid following the end of continuous enrollment.

This demonstrates that the Lorain County strike represents far more than a local contract dispute. JFS workers stand at the point where the social crisis produced by capitalism is concentrated. They confront families unable to afford food, elderly people facing abuse or eviction, workers who have lost health insurance, parents unable to pay for childcare and disabled residents attempting to navigate an increasingly punitive bureaucracy.

The UAW apparatus has responded to the Lorain County struggle by keeping the workers isolated. The union has not mobilized its hundreds of thousands of members, called coordinated action by JFS employees throughout Ohio or organized a serious campaign among the county residents who depend upon these services.

In April, another unit of UAW Local 2192 representing Lorain County Children Services workers ratified an agreement containing minimal wage increases. Rather than uniting the workers in a common struggle, the UAW has allowed the JFS strikers to remain alone on the picket line.

The prolonged strike demonstrates both the courage of the workers and the dead end of a strategy based upon appeals to county commissioners, mediators and Democratic politicians.

JFS workers must organize a rank-and-file strike committee, independent of the UAW apparatus, to place control of the struggle in the hands of the workers themselves. Such a committee should appeal directly to county employees, teachers, healthcare workers, autoworkers and JFS workers throughout Ohio for coordinated action.

The demands must include substantial wage increases that compensate for years of inflation, fully paid high-quality healthcare, the restoration of adequate staffing, the rehiring of workers who left because of low pay and workloads, and the defense and expansion of SNAP, Medicaid and all essential social programs.

The resources exist to guarantee decent wages, universal healthcare and high-quality public services. They are monopolized by a financial aristocracy and squandered on war, corporate tax reductions and the enrichment of billionaires.

The struggle of the Lorain County JFS workers is therefore a struggle for the entire working class. Workers throughout Ohio and across the country must come to their defense.



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