

Cleveland library, hospital workers authorize strike action against low wages and unsafe conditions

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More than 300 library workers and roughly 170 hospital employees in Cleveland, Ohio, have authorized strike action amid mounting anger over low wages, unsafe staffing, rising healthcare costs and attacks on working conditions.

Members of Service Employees International Union District 1199 at the Cleveland Public Library have set August 24 as a strike date if no agreement is reached on a new contract. Caregivers and support workers at Cleveland Clinic's Lutheran Hospital also voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike following months of negotiations.

The two contract struggles are developing only 25 miles from Lorain County, where more than 100 Job and Family Services workers have been on strike since February 18. Now entering their sixth month on the picket line, the Lorain County workers are carrying out one of the longest public-sector strikes in Ohio history.

The simultaneous movement of library workers, hospital employees and social service workers points to the development of a broader struggle against poverty wages and deteriorating public services. Yet the union bureaucracies are keeping these closely connected battles separated from one another, subordinating them to isolated negotiations and mediation.

Cleveland library workers set August 24 strike date

More than 300 regular full- and part-time Cleveland Public Library employees are covered by the expired collective bargaining agreement. The workforce includes clerks, custodians, library assistants, librarians, maintenance workers and technical employees.

The workers have been without a contract since the previous agreement expired at the end of 2025. On July 16, SEIU District 1199 announced that members had authorized a strike beginning August 24 if no settlement is reached.

The 2025 contractual wage schedule was divided into 10 grades and 21 steps. Starting pay was just \$16.64 an hour for the lowest-paid classifications, including materials processing technicians and some clerical workers. Branch clerks and several custodial and clerical classifications began at \$17.63 an hour.

Library assistants and maintenance mechanics generally began at \$22.27 an hour, while many professional librarians started at \$25.96.

At full-time hours, a starting wage of \$16.64 amounts to less than

\$35,000 a year before taxes and deductions. A worker beginning at \$17.63 would earn approximately \$36,700 annually. These wages leave workers vulnerable to rapidly rising housing, food, transportation and healthcare costs.

The agreement's 21-step wage system required workers to remain employed for many years before reaching the top rate in their classification.

Workers are also demanding minimum daily staffing levels and contractual protections governing the introduction of artificial intelligence.

Healthcare benefits are also included in the contract, although neither the union nor management has publicly identified medical coverage as a principal issue behind the strike authorization.

Under the expired agreement, full-time workers paid 18 percent of the premium for individual medical coverage and 35 percent for family coverage. Regular part-time workers paid half the cost of individual coverage. This two-tier system encourages the library to hire part-time staff.

The union and library administration are now working with a mediator from the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. The turn toward federal mediation is in order to keep the struggle confined within narrow legal channels and avert a broader mobilization of workers.

The Cleveland dispute follows a strike authorization by nearly 500 workers at the Cuyahoga County Public Library system in 2024. That walkout was prevented after SEIU officials reached a three-year agreement providing raises of 5 percent in 2024, 4 percent in 2025 and 3 percent in 2026.

The agreement left workers divided by library and did nothing to resolve the statewide deterioration of wages, staffing and public services. No serious effort was made to mobilize Cuyahoga County library workers together with workers at Cleveland Public Library or other public institutions.

Lutheran Hospital workers confront poverty wages and unsafe staffing

At Cleveland Clinic's Lutheran Hospital, roughly 170 unionized caregivers and support workers—including licensed practical nurses, nursing assistants, environmental services employees, maintenance

workers and physical therapy assistants—are fighting poverty-level wages and dangerous working conditions.

Some employees reportedly earn only \$12 to \$13 an hour. SEIU officials say Cleveland Clinic has offered a wage increase of just 1.5 percent.

The offer stands in stark contrast to the enormous financial resources controlled by Cleveland Clinic, one of the largest hospital systems in the United States. According to figures cited by the union from the hospital system's audited financial statements, Cleveland Clinic recorded more than \$2.3 billion in excess revenue in 2025.

Lutheran Hospital workers came within hours of striking in 2023 before the SEIU called off the walkout and announced a last-minute agreement. Union officials said that contract included average first-year wage increases of 15.6 percent, although the size of the increases varied by classification and included wage adjustments for some of the lowest-paid positions.

Three years later, many workers remain at or near poverty wages.

Staffing conditions pose an immediate danger to employees and patients. Nurses can be assigned as many as 26 patients during a shift. They are demanding assignments of no more than two or three patients.

Ohio has no law establishing enforceable maximum patient assignments for hospital nurses. In Ohio, staffing levels remain largely under the control of hospital management. This allows financial considerations to determine how many patients nurses and support staff can be forced to handle.

SEIU District 1199 says it has filed more than three dozen unfair labor practice charges with the National Labor Relations Board, alleging bad-faith bargaining, failure to provide requested information and interference with protected activity.

Environmental services worker Deka Ahmed said, "Hospital executives have chosen budgets over bedside care and profits over the people who make this hospital work. Enough is enough."

Such statements express the anger of workers, but SEIU officials have offered no strategy for mobilizing the enormous social power of hospital and public-sector workers throughout Cleveland.

Although the library and hospital employees belong to the same union, SEIU has not called joint membership meetings, organized common demonstrations or prepared coordinated strike action. Each group is instead being kept within separate bargaining timetables and separate negotiations.

Lutheran Hospital is one of only a handful of Cleveland Clinic facilities with unionized bargaining units. Most of the health system's vast workforce, including workers at its main campus, remains nonunion. By confining negotiations to roughly 170 employees at a single hospital, the SEIU leaves the workers isolated from tens of thousands of Cleveland Clinic employees who confront many of the same problems of understaffing, low pay and intensified workloads.

Lorain County workers remain isolated after five months

The consequences of this policy can be seen in Lorain County, where Job and Family Services workers represented by UAW Local 2192 have been isolated on the picket line since February 18.

Caseworkers, investigators, eligibility specialists and other employees administer programs upon which tens of thousands of

vulnerable residents depend, including Medicaid, food assistance and cash benefits. Many earn only \$15 to \$18 an hour.

Workers have also faced a sharp increase in healthcare expenses. Insurance premiums rose by approximately 50 percent over four years, followed by another 13 percent increase in 2026. These increases have consumed much of the limited wage growth workers received under previous contracts.

In April, another UAW Local 2192 bargaining unit representing Lorain County Children Services employees ratified a separate agreement. Rather than using the common conditions facing the two groups to mobilize all county workers, the UAW permitted one unit to settle while the JFS strike continued.

The union bureaucracy has not organized broader action by UAW members, public employees or other workers in Northeast Ohio to break the county's intransigence. More than 100 JFS workers have remained on strike principally because of their own determination and solidarity.

The Cleveland library and hospital strike votes create the conditions for workers to overcome this isolation. Joint action by library employees, hospital workers and Lorain County social service workers would send a powerful appeal to teachers, municipal employees, healthcare workers and other sections of the working class throughout Ohio.

Unite the struggles through rank-and-file committees

The employers confronting workers in Cleveland and Lorain County are relying on the same basic strategy: drag out negotiations, plead poverty when discussing wages and staffing, and depend on the union apparatus to keep workers divided by bargaining unit and workplace.

The fight cannot be won through mediation, unfair labor practice proceedings or appeals to corporate executives and Democratic Party politicians. These institutions have presided over decades of declining real wages, understaffing and the destruction of public services.

Workers should form rank-and-file committees at the Cleveland Public Library, Lutheran Hospital and Lorain County JFS. These committees must be democratically controlled by workers themselves and independent of the SEIU and UAW bureaucracies.

They should demand joint meetings of all three workforces, full disclosure of the negotiations, rejection of any agreement that fails to meet workers' needs and the preparation of coordinated strike action.

Appeals should be issued to nurses, teachers, city employees, transit workers, industrial workers and other sections of the working class throughout Northeast Ohio.

The struggle for living wages, safe staffing, affordable healthcare and adequately funded public services is not a collection of separate contract disputes. It is part of a common fight against a social system that subordinates every aspect of life—including healthcare, education and assistance for the poor—to private wealth and profit.



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