

Chicago nursing home workers launch strike against poverty wages, lack of protection from COVID-19

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Nearly 700 nursing home workers went on strike Monday morning at 11 of 13 facilities operated by Illinois-based Infinity Healthcare Management, predominantly located in the Chicago metropolitan region. The workers, who include certified nursing assistants (CNAs) as well as those doing crucial laundry and housekeeping, are demanding an increase to their wages, as well as hazard pay in recognition of the dangerous conditions prevailing in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities (LTCFs) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Workers are also demanding adequate personal protective equipment and improved staffing, with many overstretched workloads substantially worsened as nursing home staff themselves fall ill or have to quarantine.

Workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* said they are currently paid around \$13 per hour and are demanding raises of about \$2 per hour. This would bring CNAs up to a starting pay of \$15.50 across the state, still a poverty wage and barely above Chicago's minimum, which is set to rise to \$15 in 2021. Pay for non-CNA workers would rise to \$14.50 outside of Chicago and \$15 at facilities located in Chicago.

According to the SEIU Healthcare Illinois-Indiana union, Infinity management has refused to bring worker pay in line with the paltry increases the union negotiated earlier at 100 facilities with about 10,000 workers. In a conference call with workers Sunday, Shaba Andrich, the union's vice president for nursing homes, said that Infinity is offering only a \$15.15 starting wage for new CNAs, a \$0.25 per hour raise for those making above that, and a yearly raise of only \$0.10 per hour.

Striking workers should take warning: While posturing as fighting for low-wage workers, the SEIU has over many years perfected the art of negotiating sellout contracts for its highly exploited members, tamping down worker militancy and enforcing management's demands. In order to conduct a real fight to secure both their needs and those they care for,

striking workers should take the struggle out of the hands of SEIU and move to elect rank-and-file strike committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves.

Conditions in long-term care facilities, which were often grim even before the pandemic, have become truly horrific. Half of those who have died from COVID-19 in Illinois, 5,782, were residents at LTCFs. According to figures from the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) website, there have been at least 181 COVID-19-related deaths at Infinity's 13 facilities, and at least 1,401 positive cases. Nine of the facilities are listed as having currently open outbreaks.

One facility in particular, Niles Nursing and Rehabilitation, accounted for 54 deaths, more than any other LTCF in Illinois, and workers said at least 30 staff members contracted COVID-19. Another, the City View Multicare Center in the Chicago suburb of Cicero, registered 249 cases and 15 deaths. One of two Infinity facilities not on strike, Belhaven Nursing and Rehabilitation Center, has an open outbreak with 101 cases and nine deaths so far.

Despite the well-known and life-threatening danger to both staff and residents, workers at Infinity are not provided with adequate PPE, with one worker, Jackie Abdalebdeh, telling the *Chicago Sun-Times* she is only given one mask per workday.

Workers are angry that Infinity received \$12.7 million in federal aid through the CARES Act and is looking for more, even as it forces workers to live in poverty and does the bare minimum to protect them from COVID-19.

Clear data on deaths among nursing home workers has been difficult to determine, similar to the situation in virtually every other work sector, with the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) under Trump refusing to maintain any central figures or do anything to protect workers. According to a CNN report from July 23, one government estimate put the figure at "more than 600 workers at around 400 facilities." In all likelihood this is a

vast undercount of the deadly toll the virus is taking on workers.

Even with the dire conditions at these facilities and the evident militancy of many workers in fighting not only for themselves but for better conditions for their residents, SEIU's conference call with its members Sunday indicated many were skeptical about whether undertaking a strike led by the union is worth the lost pay, and whether they will be protected by SEIU if they are singled out by the company. Workers will receive just \$50 per day in strike pay, even less per hour than they currently make, and only if they show up for four hours of picketing.

SEIU's Andrich repeated the union's mantra, "It would have been better to get a contract without a strike," evidently wishing that Infinity had just gone along with the deal SEIU worked out in May with the Illinois Association of Health Care Facilities (IAHCF). In that struggle, despite having secured a strike vote by a wide margin, SEIU rammed through a contract that left workers without adequate PPE and with base wages that would not allow them to afford a one-bedroom apartment. The agreement provided for only \$2 per hour in COVID-19 hazard pay and just five extra sick days for workers who contract the disease.

As anger has mounted among health care and other low-wage workers in the face of intolerable and life-threatening working conditions, SEIU has worked to sabotage one struggle after another in recent months. In June, SEIU Local 1000 agreed to an over 11 percent pay cut for 96,000 state government workers in California, including nurses. In the Twin Cities, SEIU Healthcare Minnesota canceled a two-day strike in September at Allina Health after being threatened with legal action, and in October SEIU ended a five-day strike at Alameda Health System without a contract.

Closely tied to the Democratic Party, the SEIU has promoted the lie that Democrats are fighting on workers' behalf, with Andrich even claiming that Illinois' billionaire Governor J.B. Pritzker and other politicians are "with us." The reality is that Pritzker has enforced the demands of the corporations to continue production at non-essential manufacturing facilities during the pandemic just as much as his Republican counterparts in other states, with the result that industrial work sites have been the source of roughly 30 percent of Illinois' COVID-19 outbreaks.

Moreover, it should be recalled that Illinois' last Democratic governor, Pat Quinn, pushed through \$1.6 billion in cuts to Medicaid in 2012, further starving resources for health care for the state's poorest.

In order to prevent this strike from being shut down and ending in a sellout contract, nursing home workers should follow the lead of autoworkers and teachers and form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of SEIU, in order to

wage a fight for decent pay, safe and humane working conditions, and the resources necessary to provide dignified care to the elderly and those with long-term needs. Such a committee should raise the following demands:

- Adequate PPE and staffing levels in all long-term care homes across the state of Illinois, overseen by rank-and-file safety committees working with trusted medical experts
- A doubling of base wages and substantial hazard pay for all health care workers
- Fully paid sick leave with no penalties or restrictions during the pandemic and free health care for all workers
- A massive infusion of resources, not into the bank accounts of the nursing home companies and investors but toward meeting the needs of the workers and the elderly.

Infinity Healthcare, like much of the LTCF industry, reaps its profits at the expense of the lives and health of its workers and residents. The utter disaster playing out in these facilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic only underscores the failure of the capitalist profit system. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls for the trillions of dollars handed over to the giant banks and corporations to be redistributed in order to fund free, universal health care, and for the health system to be placed under democratic, public control, run to meet social need, not private profit.

The SEP and WSWs will do everything possible to assist Infinity workers in the organization of rank-and-file committees and formation of connections with other sections of workers—in health care, auto manufacturing, public education, logistics and elsewhere—to launch a common struggle for workers' rights. We urge nursing home workers to contact us today.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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