

SEIU calls off George Washington University resident doctors strike at the 11th hour

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On Monday evening, the Committee of Interns and Residents (CIR), a union affiliated with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) that is bargaining for 450 George Washington University resident doctors, announced that a tentative agreement (TA) had been reached and a planned three-day walk-out starting Tuesday had been called off.

“While we were ready to walk, the strike was averted after 7 hours in bargaining,” the CIR’s social media posts exclaimed. Now, resident doctors at the private GWU hospital had a TA that “recognizes our humanity.”

The negotiations for a contract have been ongoing for nearly 15 months following the residents’ initial vote to unionize. They state their schedule requires them to work 80-hour work weeks, a situation which frequently leads to burnout and mental health issues. This is combined with near-minimum-wage pay, limiting their ability to find living arrangements nearby in the expensive Washington D.C. region.

A pay scale published by GWU states first-year residents take home around \$66,000 in yearly pay, while those in their seventh year bring home an average of \$84,300. Under the new proposal, they would receive a 21 percent pay increase and a \$4,000 ratification bonus.

While this is being praised as a “massive victory” by CIR, it is barely helping ends to meet. This increase, when applied to the residents’ current salary, brings a first-year resident nearly up to the minimum required salary to meet the cost of living in Washington D.C.

Regarding burnout, anxiety and overwork, minor improvements have been made that do not address the basic problems.

According to the *Washington Post*, in a lengthy article last spring, residents at GWU “described feeling

trapped in a stressful environment where some degree of depression seemed almost normal, causing doctors to go through the motions, lose interest in hobbies and count the minutes until they could leave the clinic to go home and be alone.”

In spring, a GWU hospital resident, William Ballantyne West Jr., committed suicide due to the stress and overwork at his job.

Residents had demanded a \$5,000 stipend for mental health purposes so they could seek treatment outside of their place of employment, fearing “their struggles would be used against them,” according to the *Post*. CIR reports 50 percent of residents suffer from burnout, while 25 percent face severe depression.

The current TA, based on a limited list of “highlights,” does little to address this. Doctors have been granted a \$1,000 healthcare stipend, about 20 percent of their original demand. Nothing has been done to restrict overwork. Rather than “acknowledging their humanity,” a clause in the TA insultingly provides a “Lyft/cab ride home AND back to hospital if fatigued after a shift.” (Emphasis in original)

Residents were able to obtain four weeks of parental leave, an improvement over the original policy which varied the amount of time off based on job description. This was a climb-down from the previous demand for six weeks leave.

“We had to make a lot of difficult decisions in order to make an agreement tonight, but we’re confident that this really set the groundwork to be able to continue to build upon this contract in future generations,” stated Maryssa Miller, an internal medicine resident and member of the bargaining committee, to the *Post*.

Universal Health Services, which runs GWU hospital, is a Fortune 500 company and the largest for-profit healthcare organization in the country. It pocketed

\$14.3 billion in revenue and \$717.8 million in profit in 2023.

The limited strike was organized in close collaboration with the hospital. According to hospital spokeswoman Susan LaRosa, “All patient care services and hospital operations” would have been “proceeding as normal, unimpeded, and uninterrupted,” in the event of a strike. The hospital had prepared contingencies, forcing non-union doctors to cover patients during the strike.

Under these circumstances, the CIR-SEIU has said little about what happened in the final, last-minute bargaining session held Monday, which caused management to completely reverse itself, delivering residents a supposedly massive win without a single shot fired.

One of the key “wins” from the standpoint of the hospital and the wealthy SEIU executives is that it appears the possibility for a healthcare work stoppage in the heart of the US capital has been taken off the agenda. The *Post* noted in announcing the TA that GWU doctors, “given the hospital’s location six blocks from the White House and three blocks from the State Department, care for high-profile dignitaries.”

Miller, of the CIR bargaining committee, reflecting the CIR-SEIU leadership’s opposition to even the most limited work stoppage, added tellingly: “Of course, no one wanted it to go this far ... but the most successful strike, is the one that’s called off before it happens.”

This is despite a growing movement of healthcare workers throughout the United States seeking to assert their basic social rights in the face of corporate-driven cost cutting and abuse.

Workers at Unity Health Care, which operates the largest system of community care clinics throughout the Washington D.C. region, voted during the summer to strike, but according to the *Post* “have yet to pause work.” The National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees (NUHHCE) is the union there.



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