

Minnesota: Deer River Essentia Health strike enters 27th day

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Friday marks the 27th day of an open-ended strike by 70 Essentia Health workers in Deer River, Minnesota. The strike, which began on December 8, is now the longest in the facility's history—a testament to the resolve and determination of the striking workers.

Members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the striking healthcare workers—licensed practical nurses, cooks, phlebotomists, and others—are fighting for a significant wage increase and better working conditions after working without a contract since September 30, 2023.

The Deer River strike is part of a larger wave of class struggle within the United States and globally, as workers increasingly rebel against decades of stagnant wages, austerity, and the erosion of their living conditions. This strike follows a limited five-day walkout in November that failed to secure any advancements for the workers, underscoring the impotent and fundamentally betraying role of the union leadership.

The previous contract talks between Essentia Health and the SEIU took place in 2019. During these talks, both parties agreed to a three-year contract that expired on September 30, 2023. Workers are now fighting against the miserable wages agreed to by the union and the company.

Deer River Essentia workers earn wages 20 to 30 percent below the market rate, making them some of the lowest-paid employees within the Essentia system. Their primary demand is a 55 percent wage increase over three years to bring their earnings in line with those of their peers. Essentia Health management has dismissed this demand as “unrealistic,” citing financial challenges faced by rural healthcare.

This claim is contradicted by the obscene salaries awarded to Essentia executives. In 2022, CEO David Herman received \$3.07 million in compensation, one of the highest payouts among healthcare executives nationwide. This grotesque disparity highlights the parasitic role of the corporate elite, who extract immense wealth at the expense of workers tasked with delivering critical care.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated the dire state of healthcare in the United States. At Essentia Health, workforce cuts during the initial stages of the pandemic reduced some departments to less than a third of their pre-pandemic staffing levels. These reductions intensified workloads, increased burnout, and placed both workers and patients at risk.

The pandemic is not merely a natural disaster but a crisis compounded by ruling-class indifference and profit-driven policies. While workers were lauded as “heroes” in public speeches, their pay and working conditions continued to deteriorate, even as hospital systems reaped record profits.

In the past year, Essentia Health has already ratified 17 other contracts with bargaining units representing healthcare workers, including those under the Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA), United Steelworkers (USW), and United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW).

These agreements expose how the union bureaucracy has isolated the strikers from their coworkers across Essentia and the healthcare industry.

This strategy mirrors past betrayals, such as the strike by Allina Health workers, where mental health workers were isolated from 15,000 nurses who began their

strike separately that same year. Similarly, in 2016, the MNA settled contracts at every hospital except Allina, leaving 6,000 nurses to fight alone. These divisive tactics are rooted in the unions' alliance with the Democratic Party, whose pro-corporate policies serve the interests of the ruling class.

Rather than uniting Essentia workers across facilities—or linking the Deer River strike with other healthcare and public-sector struggles in Minnesota, such as the ongoing strike authorization vote by Duluth city workers—the SEIU has pursued a piecemeal approach that limits the potential for unified struggle.

This history cannot be ignored and must serve as a lesson for present struggles. To win this fight, Deer River Essentia workers must break free from the constraints of the SEIU bureaucracy and take their struggle into their own hands. This means forming rank-and-file committees to unite with other healthcare workers and broader sections of the working class, independent of the unions and the Democratic Party.

The Deer River strike is not an isolated event but a symptom of the broader crisis of global capitalism. Healthcare systems worldwide are being gutted as resources are funneled into war, financial speculation, and corporate profits. Workers across industries face the same fundamental struggle: the defense of their livelihoods against the relentless assault of austerity, exploitation and inequality.



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