

Baltimore hospital workers go on three-day strike

By Adam Soroka
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About 2,000 maintenance workers, janitors, technical workers, and kitchen staff staged a three-day strike last week at Johns Hopkins Hospital (JHH) to demand higher wages.

The wages paid out by the hospital are so low that they force many workers to rely on food stamps and other public assistance programs. 1,400 of the 2,000 striking workers were earning less than \$14.92, the wage at which a single parent with a child qualifies for food stamps. Rising living costs have forced some of the workers to stay in homeless shelters.

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) 1199 United Healthcare Workers East is calling for a gradual increase over the next four years of the JHH minimum wage from \$10.71 an hour to \$14 an hour for new hires and \$15 an hour for workers with at least 15 years of experience at the hospital. This wage level would still leave the great majority of workers in poverty.

The hospital's counteroffer would raise the minimum wage in yearly increments of two percent, hitting \$12.25 by 2018. Citing the hospital's "finite pool of funds," a JHH spokesperson claimed that "You can only give so much if you want to preserve jobs."

Hospital director Ron Peterson's base salary increased about \$49,500 to \$1.1 million in 2012. After an expansion to his pension benefits, his total compensation in 2012 skyrocketed by 86.5 percent.

Johns Hopkins Medicine (JHM) encompasses Johns Hopkins Hospital (JHH) and the internationally renowned Johns Hopkins University. It has an annual budget of about \$6.5 billion and is the largest employer in the Baltimore area.

JHM also receives billions of dollars in private and government grants and donations; in 2012 it received \$2.59 billion in federal grant money. It recently spent

\$1.1 billion on the construction of a new building, including two 12-story towers over an area of five acres.

Last year billionaire Michael Bloomberg presented JHM with a \$350 million donation. Union officials estimate that meeting their wage demands would add an extra \$3 million to the hospital's annual payroll expenses. In 2013, JHH had an operating surplus of \$145 million.

A poll conducted by *US News* showed patient satisfaction with JHH is among the highest in the country. Sixty-six percent of respondents answered "always" when asked if patients' rooms were kept clean, compared to 11 percent answering "sometimes or never." Seventy-nine percent of respondents answered "always" when asked if nurses were "courteous and respectful, listened carefully, and explained things clearly," compared to 4 percent who answered "sometimes or never."

The implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), President Barack Obama's signature domestic initiative, has created a special commission in Maryland tasked with recouping \$330 million in Medicare spending over the next five years. In order to achieve this goal, the state government has announced a new initiative to overhaul the way Maryland hospitals receive payment for services. Previously, all Maryland hospitals were reimbursed by the state on a fee-for-services basis. Under the new scheme, Medicare reimbursement will be far more selective.

The SEIU collaborated extensively with the hospital management in order to ensure the strike would be contained. The union gave JHH ten days' notice before calling the strike, allowing the hospital ample time to bring in scabs and allow management to attain a favorable position leading up to the strike. As a result,

Peterson was able to boast in a letter to the *Baltimore Sun* that “we are continuing to provide uninterrupted services.”

On Friday, the final day of the strike, picketing workers were informed that anyone on hospital premises after 6 p.m. would be arrested and fired. To back up these threats, Baltimore police were posted on every street corner of the hospital. At 6 p.m. SEIU shop stewards and police shooed the workers off hospital grounds, and night shift workers returned to their jobs without a contract. Workers were not given strike pay. Significantly, the threat of firings and arrests went completely unreported in the local news media.

The SEIU web site, while saturated with praise for the Affordable Care Act, has offered no reportage of last week’s strike. Both the SEIU and Johns Hopkins management will return to the bargaining table during the week.

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