

Strike by University of Illinois at Chicago nurses and workers continues, as Illinois Democratic governor threatens to decimate state budget

By James Martin and Kristina Betinis
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More than 800 nurses at the University of Illinois Hospital (UIH) in Chicago entered their fifth day on strike Tuesday, having been joined by 4,000 staff at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and its medical centers in Chicago, Rockford and Peoria.

The strikes by nurses and university staff are part of the growing resistance of the working class—including teachers, autoworkers and graduate students at the University of Michigan—to poverty conditions and the dangers of working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There has been a virtual blackout of the two strikes in the national press, in an indication of the growing fear in ruling circles over the development of working class opposition in the final weeks before the US elections. The *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Sun-Times* both published only perfunctory reports Monday, with no coverage of the strike at all Tuesday.

The deeply nervous financial elite, relying on the Democratic Party and their adjuncts in the unions, are working to shut down the strikes as soon as possible, while at the same time preparing a massive escalation of austerity measures and attacks on workers in the midst of the unprecedented social crisis brought on by the economic crisis.

On Tuesday, Illinois Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker, a billionaire heir to the Hyatt Hotel chain fortune, announced he was ordering state agencies to prepare for a “nightmare scenario” and budget cuts of 5 to 10 percent if the federal government does not pass additional aid for states, which seems less and less likely.

Striking workers find themselves in a direct struggle against both the state and the Democratic Party. Pritzker sits on the board of trustees at the University of Illinois and appoints its members, the same board which is insisting that there is not enough money to pay UIC workers or meet their

demands.

University staff on strike at UIC include clerks, maintenance workers, service workers, parking attendants, custodians, emergency medical technicians and physical therapists. The staff are represented by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73, which is keeping the strikers at UIC isolated from the 25,000 workers in Local 73 at universities, schools and workplaces throughout the state.

“We are demanding a \$15 minimum wage, to be in line with the city,” said Tyler Nielsen, a program coordinator in the Honors College for four years, speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site* on the picket lines Tuesday.

“The university is proposing [a raise] over five years, and we want it sooner,” Tyler added. “We also want back pay for the last 15 months. We’re demanding proper PPE for all workers in the hospital and on campus, protections against outsourcing and unfair labor practices, and improved time off and leave. Right now, they’re holding out on our pay.”

Some of the university staff only make a little over \$10 an hour, an unlivable wage in Chicago. Many make under Chicago’s minimum wage of \$14 an hour, with the university claiming it does not apply on the grounds that they are state workers.

In relation to the high cost of living in the city, Tyler noted, “I know building service workers who live in Tri-Taylor [the area around the university], and it’s not cheap. So we are trying to make gains on the pay.” Monthly rent in Illinois averages \$1,590, while rents in Chicago average about \$1,943.

Over 1,300 nurses in the Illinois Nurses Association (INA) union at UI Hospital initially voted to go on strike, but the university secured a court injunction to keep some 500 critical care nurses on the job. The injunction cynically cited patient safety, but the hospital administration has eroded

patient safety for years by understaffing and pushing nurses, doctors and health care workers to their limits. The nurses and health care workers are demanding lower nurse-to-patient ratios and better protective equipment and safety measures to defend themselves against COVID-19.

Over 9,000 health care workers have died from COVID-19 since the pandemic spread across the United States, provoking a series of strikes by nurses. Recently, the INA sold out the 700 nurses who struck for two weeks in Joliet, Illinois, abandoning the main demand for a reduction in the dangerous nurse-to-patient ratio.

The INA hopes to wrap the strike up by the weekend, having limited the walkout in advance to just one week. Neither SEIU Local 73 nor the INA is providing strike pay for their members.

The SEIU, for its part, has a long record of enforcing poverty wages and sellout contracts on its members, including in the Chicago teachers strike in 2019 and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign service workers strike in 2013. None of the demands and needs of the educators and university workers over pay and working conditions were met.

But there is deep opposition among nurses and university workers to the conditions they face and a growing determination to fight.

In an indication of the anxiety of the Democrats to end the strike as quickly as possible, Jesse Jackson, a longtime Democratic Party hack, arrived at the UIC picket lines early Monday. Jackson has a long history of arriving at strikes and protests to issue demagogic statements feigning support for workers, while working behind the scenes with the unions and the political establishment to shut down the struggles and ensure they do not develop into a broader movement of the working class against the two-party system and capitalism.

In line with the efforts by the Democratic Party to divide workers along racial lines heading into the 2020 elections, Jackson, along with the SEIU, has sought to make race the dominant issue, not class. The official SEIU 73 placards handed to strikers reflect this racialist line: “Racism is a public health crisis.” In reality, the multiethnic and multiracial striking workers all face poverty wages and inadequate access to health care.

The chorus of race politics has been joined by the other unions flanking the SEIU at the pickets. Stacy Davis Gates, vice president of the Chicago Teachers Union, said on Monday, “If black lives mattered, you would have a contract. If Latinx lives mattered, you would have a contract. If Filipino lives mattered, you would have a contract.”

Jackson and the high-paid union officials such as Gates,

who make up a key constituency of the Democratic Party, have sought to point the finger at Donald Trump and the Republican Party for the social crisis facing millions of workers during the pandemic, all in an effort to channel social opposition back behind Biden and the Democrats in the 2020 elections. In reality, the assault on the living standards of the working class is a bipartisan war carried out by both parties over decades in the interests of the corporate and financial elite. The pandemic has accelerated these processes.

The Democrats and Republicans joined together to swiftly pass the CARES Act in March, offering meager assistance to the unemployed while stabilizing the stock markets and transferring over \$3 trillion to Wall Street and the major corporations. The markets have since soared, buoyed by low interest rates and a flood of cheap money from the Federal Reserve, and the billionaires have had their wealth rise by over \$637 billion.

In that period, more than 30 million workers lost their jobs, and tens of thousands died from the COVID-19 virus in the United States alone. After Wall Street was bailed out, the corporate and political establishment pushed workers to get back to work and risk their lives to keep corporate profits flowing.

There is great concern among the corporate elite and their political representatives in both the Democratic and Republican parties that the resistance of the working class will disrupt the stock market bonanza and develop into a direct confrontation with capitalism.

As past experience has shown, no trust can be placed in the unions or the Democrats. Nurses and university workers must take matters into their own hands and form rank-and-file strike committees. The struggle at UIC must be broadened and linked up with the deep opposition felt among millions of workers in a fight to ensure that the rights and needs of the working class are secured.

Contact us to learn more about forming a rank-and-file committee or to share your story.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>