

Strike of nearly 5,000 University of Illinois Health nurses and workers reaching a critical juncture

By Jessica Goldstein
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The strike of 4,000 service workers at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) Hospital and 800 nurses at the statewide University of Illinois Hospital (UIH) system is reaching a critical turning point. The strike puts nearly 5,000 public sector workers in conflict with the Democratic Party apparatus, which controls the state of Illinois.

Beginning Friday, the Illinois Nurses Association (INA) shut down the strike of 800 nurses and forced them back to work without a contract Saturday morning after meeting with UIH administrators Thursday night. This left 4,000 striking service workers who are members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73 isolated on the picket lines at the UIC Hospital, part of the UIH system. Local 73 also kept 25,000 of its members working throughout the strike, isolating the membership from within.

The INA called for a limited seven-day strike, which began September 12 following a near-unanimous strike vote. However, only 800 nurses took up pickets because of a restraining order against 525 nurses who work in critical care settings. The ruling was made in response to a complaint by the 13-member board of University of Illinois Trustees, which includes Illinois Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker.

Nurses went on strike for safe staff-to-patient ratios, adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) and an end to wage cuts. So far, none of their demands have been met.

Negotiations between the INA and UIH administrators, which include the university board comprised of millionaire and billionaire trustees, are set to resume today. Both the INA and SEIU have worked to keep their members in the dark about negotiations. Meanwhile, the Chicago corporate press, including the *Sun-Times* and

Tribune newspapers, are blacking out the strike to prevent support for the strike from reaching the working class more broadly.

On Saturday, WBBM News Radio reported that the UIC hospital was offering raises of 0, 1.5, 1.5 and 1.5 percent for the four-year contract term after an initial demand for a wage freeze.

Negotiations are ongoing for SEIU Local 73 service workers who joined the strike Monday, only after an overwhelming expression of desire to join the striking nurses could not be quelled by the union leadership. Service workers at UIC called for a strike vote during the first week of September.

These workers include cashiers, custodians, parking attendants, laboratory animal caretakers, emergency medical technicians and physical therapists. They are on strike for access to PPE, increased staffing levels, a minimum hourly wage of \$15, and protection of their jobs and benefits.

Though located near downtown Chicago, many service workers at UIC are paid less than the city's minimum wage of \$14 per hour for employers with 21 or more workers. This is possible through a loophole that classified them as state workers, because they work for the University of Illinois system.

The \$15-per-hour wage promoted by the SEIU union is itself a poverty wage, and even if granted will not win anything substantial for the workers, but merely bring it into line with Chicago's minimum wage increase to \$15 per hour scheduled to take effect July 1, 2021.

The SEIU is one of the organizations behind the "Fight for \$15" campaign which began in 2012, when \$15 per hour was still an inadequate wage for many workers in US cities. Since then it has not sought to adjust this demand, even though \$15 in 2012 equated to roughly

\$16.70 in 2019.

From the start, both the INA and SEIU have sought to isolate and limit the struggle of hospital workers in order to enforce all of management's demands. Both unions claim that all workers can do is appeal for support to Governor Pritzker, a billionaire himself with a net worth of \$3.4 billion.

In July, the INA betrayed a courageous struggle of over 700 nurses at the AMITA St. Joseph's Health Medical center in Joliet, Illinois. The union sent them back to work after a contract was pushed through with a vote by only 43 percent of eligible members. The contract did nothing to address staff-to-patient ratios or protections against COVID-19 and kept the exorbitant cost of out-of-pocket contributions to health premiums capped at 25 percent for full-time and 35 percent for part-time nurses. They received no wage increases for 2020 under the contract, only a \$500 bonus for full-time nurses and \$250 for part-timers. Wages will increase by just 2 percent in 2021 and 2022 under the concessions deal, below the rate of inflation in 2019.

In May, the SEIU refused to call a strike, after nearly 10,000 nursing home workers voted for one by a wide margin, and pushed through a deal containing poverty wages and no additional health and safety measures as the deadly coronavirus continued to rip through facilities.

After giving striking service workers no strike pay whatsoever for nearly one week, the SEIU recently announced a bogus "hardship fund." According to its website, it will provide only "eligible workers" a paltry sum of "up to a maximum of \$250 per week and \$550 in total or until all funds have been disbursed." Workers cannot even apply for these benefits until September 28. This is part of a deliberate plan by the union to force workers to accept a concessions deal through economic blackmail.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to striking building service workers about their struggle on the picket lines.

"It's really about the wages," Kevin told reporters. "We're not paid enough for what we do. They took our COVID pay. The virus is still here. We should still be getting paid for that too." He explained that workers were initially given \$5 in addition to base pay, but that was peeled back.

"Right now, I'm at \$18 an hour. It's hard to survive. I'm staying with my family, I have a car loan, internet, phone bills, car insurance. I'm barely staying afloat."

Another worker, Zach, said: "I make \$17 an hour. If I do overtime, I got to do one more day just to cover that

day. Because they take our taxes. Then they bring the random people [the scabs], paying them \$40 an hour!"

UIH brought in scabs from COVID-19 hotspots like Texas, Tennessee, Nevada and Mississippi. The SEIU did nothing to mobilize opposition to the use of strikebreakers, even though doing so posed a threat to public health.

The SEIU controls over \$430 million in assets as of 2019, including \$150 million in cash. Its Illinois Political Action Committee controls tens of millions of dollars, mainly funded by members' dues, which is used to fund the campaigns of Democratic party candidates. According to illinoissunshine.org, SEIU spent over \$2 million alone on the mayoral campaign of Cook County Commissioner and cost-cutter Toni Preckwinkle in 2019.

Workers are determined to keep fighting. The only way for service workers and nurses at UIC and UIH to combat poverty wages and the threat of the pandemic is to take their struggle into their own hands. Workers must act now to form their own rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the INA and SEIU and the Democratic Party, and reject any contract offer that the unions bring back which does not meet all of their demands.

These committees must fight to break the isolation imposed by the INA and SEIU to appeal to workers throughout Chicago and the state of Illinois and call for the expansion of the strike. This requires linking up with autoworkers, teachers, students, food processing and logistics workers, and others facing the same conditions and threats to their health in a fight for an end to corporate control over health care and workers' lives.

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