

UIC: Largest strike since start of the economic crisis

written by Joe Iosbaker
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UIC strikers march for decent contract. Photo: FightBack!News/J. Burger

Chicago, Sept. 17 — The strike of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73 and the Illinois Nurses Association (INA) at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) shows no sign of ending. Starting when the INA, representing 1,300 nurses, walked out Saturday, Sept. 12, the strike ballooned to 5,300 on Monday, Sept. 14, when Local 73 put down their brooms, keyboards and medical equipment to hit the picket lines.

Many people believe that the modern labor movement was born in a strike wave with the 1929 stock market crash that ushered in the Great Depression. In fact, the first strikes during the depression were two years later, and there weren't a large number of strikes until 1934. Since the pandemic triggered the deepest economic crisis since the 1930s, other than small strikes at Amazon and other warehouses, there have been no significant strikes to speak of.

Management at UIC certainly did not expect this strike, as the INA has never struck UIH, and Local 73 has only had one strike of several hundred workers in the professional civil service titles in 2012.

The deaths of four workers in the hospital, and the death of a nurse's spouse due to management's failure to prepare for the COVID-19 pandemic was one of the sparks that launched the strike. For the Local 73 members, their anger focused on the death of Juan Martinez, a surgical technologist who had been a founder and leader of the Technical Workers bargaining unit.

For INA, two nurses and the spouse of another nurse at UIH died of COVID this spring. One of the nurses who died, Joyce Pacubas-Le Blanc, was Filipina. Sheila Puntal, another Filipina nurse who contracted the virus because of management's refusal to provide adequate PPE passed it to her husband, Anthony Walo, also Filipino, who died from it. Nurse Puntal gave heartbreaking expression of her pain when she spoke to a strike rally on Tuesday, of how she brought the disease home that killed her husband.

At UIC, the vast majority of Local 73's 4,000 members are Black and Latinx, and the INA's 1,300 members are mostly oppressed nationalities as well. The largest number of nurses are Filipinos, but among the strikers there are also East Asians, South Asians, Latinx and Blacks. It is well known that disproportionately, all of these oppressed communities suffer much higher infection and death rates from COVID-19. This racist health disparity fuels much of the anger on the picket lines.

Nerissa Allegretti, a Filipina community organizer with the National Alliance for Filipino Concerns, and a health worker herself, spoke to the INA rally on Saturday, Sept. 12. "I came from a 12-hour night shift to join you this rainy day. The loss of lives of my fellow frontliners, nurses, health workers, essential workers and their families to COVID-19 could have been avoided if the UIC management acted on the need for PPE. My heart cries and is raging with fire for all the nurses and workers who are taken away from us not only because of COVID, but because management doesn't have a heart for its workers. When management ignores us, it is just to strike! Strike is life!"

All the nurses applauded, but the Filipinos among them echoed her derision when Allegretti cursed as she spoke about the crisis-ridden economic system in their homeland such that 6,000 of their compatriots are forced to leave the Philippines daily for overseas work.

The nationwide rebellion emerges in the labor movement

There was another fuse that was lit this spring with the police murder of George Floyd. The greatest uprising of protests in U.S. history has occurred since May 25, with 20 million or more people having taken part in protests. In Chicago, perhaps 200,000 have been in the streets starting on May 30, when the Chicago Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression brought 20,000 into the Loop to call for justice for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery.

On Wednesday, strikers marched on the mansion home of Chancellor Michael Amiridis. One of the speakers was Angie Ross, a medical office specialist in physical therapy.

Ross stated: “It’s so good to see everybody joined together here today, showing how strong we really are. I’ve been a UIC employee for over eight years, and I’ve been in the battle with you all. Management treats us like we don’t matter. If someone is essential, you take care of them. PPE should be readily available to us in the office or in patient care. Why are we underpaid? We risk our lives every day. We stepped up to the plate against COVID, now UIC needs to step up and take care of us! We are humans: treat us like a human being! We make that hospital run. We make the campus run, and if you want us to continue to make it run, you need to step up to the plate and give us what we need.”

Listening to Ross, the crowd of more than 1,000 workers was on fire. In fact, the tone of the strike by INA and Local 73 has been fired up since it began.

Ross — and Local 73 picket signs — used language from the uprising: Black lives matter. Also, Local 73 is led by its first Black president, Dian Palmer. President Palmer also led 7,000 members, overwhelmingly Black and Latinx out on strike against the Chicago Public Schools in the fall. And when the Chicago Alliance marched and drove into the Loop on May 30, Dian Palmer was there as well.

Also like the rebellion in the streets against police crimes, this strike is on the offense. SEIU strikers are not just trying to hold on to past gains, but instead demanding significant wage increases, and the nurses are demanding staffing levels like they have in California.

For all these reasons, the UIC strike is the biggest thing happening in labor in the country.

Source: [FightBack!News](#)

