

Nurses Strike Appalachian Hospitals for Better Patient Care

by [James Parks](#), Oct 12, 2007



John L. Lewis is probably turning in his grave. The nurses at the hospitals the legendary labor leader started to help sick miners are on strike because their managers' policies are endangering patient care.

Some 800 nurses, members of the [United American Nurses](#) (UAN), have been on strike at nine Appalachian Regional Healthcare (ARH) hospitals in Kentucky and West Virginia since Oct. 1. The nurses are concerned that staffing decisions and rampant mandatory overtime are preventing them from giving patients the best possible care. In contract negotiations, ARH is proposing modest pay raises, but then is demanding to cut holiday pay and increase

health care premiums, effectively wiping out the raises.

Says Sarah Hunley, a registered nurse for 37 years at ARH's hospital in Harlan, Ky.:

We're being asked to do impossible tasks, to be responsible for too many patients. Some days we have as many as 12 patients to care for. That's too much for one person to do without making a mistake. I tell my husband who is a retired teacher that if he makes a mistake, he can just erase the board. If a nurse makes a mistake, it could erase someone off the earth.

ARH is trying to impose its last offer, Hunley says. As soon as the nurses walked out, the company brought in replacement nurses—and now is housing some of them in vacant wings of the hospitals.

Mine Workers ([UMWA](#)) President Cecil Roberts condemned the practices of the hospital chain's private owners.

The ARH hospitals are known as the "miners" hospitals' for a reason—our union founded them to provide care for miners and other people from the coal fields who were being overlooked by the health care system decades ago. It's outrageous to see that, once again, the people who are supposed to be served by these hospitals are threatened with a lower standard of care because of hospital management's worship of the bottom line.

Many of these facilities still bear witness to their UMWA origins with photos of John L. Lewis and other UMWA members on their walls. It is outrageous to John L.'s memory for scabs and hired security guards to be paraded in front of his image.

The United Steelworkers (**USW**), whose 2,700 members at ARH hospitals **walked out** for three weeks in the spring, is also supporting the nurses. UAN represents registered nurses at the ARH facilities and USW represents certified nurse aides, licensed practical nurses, housekeepers, maintenance and clerical workers at ARH hospitals.

The communities where the nurses serve are giving them strong support. Last week, the Letcher (Ky.) Fiscal Court, the equivalent of the county council, voted unanimously for a resolution supporting the nurses.

The resolution reads in part:

The nurses provide high quality care for the citizens of Letcher County and deserve to have a labor agreement that is fair. The Letcher County Fiscal Court disapproves of and is disappointed in the hospital for using out-of-county replacement nurses to fill the position of those on strike. This will result in a lower standard of care for the citizens of Letcher County and make it more difficult to reach a fair labor agreement.

Earlier this week, state legislators joined nurses for a rally in Charleston, W.Va. In Hazard, Ky., the Democratic candidate for lieutenant governor, Daniel Mongiardo, a surgeon, refused to cross the nurses' picket line.

Hunley is not surprised by the support. She says:

This is home to us and we like it. We like our patients—they're our friends and neighbors and we want to give them the best care. We're fighting a big corporate giant, but we're right in what we're doing.