

UChicago Medicine workers threaten strike

By Katherine Davis



Credit: SEIU Local 73

Charles Matthews, a building engineer at UChicago Medicine, at an SEIU Local 73 press conference outside Mitchell Hospital in Hyde Park

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About 125 workers at the University of Chicago Medicine plan to begin striking on July 14, following extended contract negotiations, which workers say are at an impasse.

Service Employees International Union Local 73, which represents UChicago Medicine's trade and supply chain workers, announced a 10-day strike notice at a press conference today outside of the academic health system's Mitchell Hospital in Hyde Park.

In a statement, SEIU said contract negotiations have been underway for more than six months. The last contract expired Feb. 3. Workers are bargaining for higher wages, which they say have not kept pace with inflation, and improved benefits, such as cheaper health insurance options.

Leah Fried, SEIU Local 73's campaign director and lead negotiator on behalf of the UChicago Medicine workers, said the union is prepared to continue to bargain with management ahead of the strike date.

"We don't want to strike, but we're ready to do it because (UChicago Medicine), although they are very wealthy, refuse to respect the work that these people do," Fried said.

If the two parties don't come to an agreement over the next week and a half, the workers will begin their strike on July 14, and it will "last as long necessary" to secure a contract, an SEIU official said.

The group of workers is responsible for essential hospital duties, including delivering fresh linens, IV bags and other supplies, as well as maintaining cooling and heating systems.

The union also said it has filed multiple unfair labor practice charges against UChicago Medicine with the National Labor Relations Board. SEIU claims the academic health system has surveilled union activity, canceled bargaining sessions in retaliation for concerted activity and failed to provide relevant information during bargaining sessions.

SEIU Local 73 represents 35,000 workers, primarily in public service positions in school districts, municipalities and social service agencies, across Illinois and Indiana.

UChicago Medicine is the fifth-largest health system in Chicago, according to Crain's data. The nonprofit health system reported a nearly \$50 million surplus on more than \$3.7 billion in operating revenue in the fiscal year ended June 30, 2023, according to its most recent financial report.

UChicago Medicine, however, recently suggested it's facing financial challenges when it laid off 180 workers, or more than 1%, of its workforce earlier this year.

"We continue to review further ways to operate more efficiently," a spokesperson said at the time.

A UChicago Medicine spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment today about the upcoming strike.