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Delco jail guards are considering a strike after another worker was attacked Union leaders say chronic understaffing at the George W. Hill Correctional Facility is putting guards at risk. The company that manages it says their challenges are not unique.

Leaders of the union representing the guards at the George W. Hill Correctional Facility say chronic understaffing at the Delaware County jail has led to two guards being seriously injured in assaults by inmates and now has some talking about a strike. The most recent attack came late Sunday, when Corrections Officer Robert Staton was pushed down a flight of stairs by a prisoner and left "broken and bleeding" until another inmate found him and reported the incident, according to Frank Kwaning, the president of the Delaware County Prison Employees Independent Union. It followed a similar assault last summer. "They're fearing for their lives," Kwaning said. "It is to the point where members are now willing to take action." Kwaning said that there is no strike vote planned by the union's 250 members but that it has been discussed. He estimated that the jail has 30 staff openings and some employees are doing the work of three or four people. "Almost all of our members said we have to act," Kwaning said. "They're saying if this is where we're at, they won't go to work." According to Kwaning, the union has repeatedly brought these concerns to the GEO Group, a private-prison conglomerate that operates the 1,883-bed jail in Folsom. Their concerns have "fallen on deaf ears," he said. In a statement, a spokesperson for the GEO Group said its leadership has been in contact with county officials about the staffing levels at the jail, which they contend are identical to other jails in surrounding counties. "It would be absurd to question the staffing issues at George W. Hill as if it's a unique situation especially considering the crisis that Philadelphia's jail and other county jails are facing," the statement said, referring to reports of violence and inmate riots at the city's correctional facilities. The Florida-based company took over operations of Delaware County's jail in 1998, and it remains the only privately run county prison in Pennsylvania. GEO has been hosting recruitment fairs to find more workers for George W. Hill and recently began offering a \$3,000 employee referral bonus. However, the spokesperson said that these efforts have been undercut by "the uncertainty of the contract between GEO Group and Delaware County and the negative rhetoric from the Delaware County Commissioners." In recent months, the Delaware County Council has taken steps to deprivatize the facility, including hiring two consulting firms to oversee the transition. The push came after years of criticism against the facility by county leaders and citizen activists, alleging poor conditions amid a number of highly publicized prisoner suicides. The county has yet to exercise its option to end its five-year, \$259 million contract with GEO - the final step in returning the jail to a county-run model - but officials in the county estimate that may come either later this year or early next. Meanwhile, Staton, the injured guard, has been discharged from the hospital after being treated for a broken jaw, broken orbital bone, and brain swelling, according to Kwaning. The inmate who attacked him has not been identified, but a spokesperson for the Delaware County District Attorney's Office said the incident remains under investigation. The attack on Staton is almost identical to one that left a guard with three broken vertebrae in August 2020. In that incident, Khaishaun Farmer, 20, punched and body-slammed an unnamed guard while the guard was locking down his cell block, according to the affidavit of probable cause for his arrest. Farmer was charged with aggravated assault and reckless endangerment of another person. His criminal case is pending.