

Hundreds of nurses strike Michigan hospital over staffing cuts

A WSWWS reporter
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More than 500 nurses at Mount Clemens General Hospital have been on strike since August 9. The strike is primarily over staffing issues. MCGH management has imposed an increased workload on the nursing staff, already drastically reduced by the elimination of 100 positions over the past year. The nurses are members of Local 40 of the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU), which has been in arbitration with the hospital since 2003 for contract violations related to staffing.

MCGH is a 288-bed acute care osteopathic hospital located in Macomb County, about 20 miles north of Detroit. The hospital employs 2,300 workers, including 480 staff physicians, making it one of the larger employers in Macomb County. Of the more than 500 nurses employed by the hospital, only 172 are full-time nurses. The remaining nurses are considered either part-time or contingent, and have second jobs or work at more than one hospital.

The hospital is presently maintaining operations using professional scabs from a Denver-based company that specializes in staffing strikes in the health care industry, and has threatened to hire permanent replacement workers if the nurses refuse to cave in to the hospital's demands.

On Sunday, August 15, nurses rejected the hospital's latest and final offer by a overwhelming 3 to 1 margin. The nurses are manning 24-hour pickets, and have received considerable support from workers and residents in the surrounding community. Lawn placards expressing support for the nurses abound in the neighborhood surrounding the hospital.

Of particular importance to the nurses is the increase in the nurse-patient ratio to between 9 to 10 patients per nurse—a ratio that would be bad enough if it were only confined to each nurse's primary area of expertise.

Now, however, the hospital is shuttling nurses from one department to the next, or as one nurse characterized the attitude of hospital management: "To them, a nurse is a nurse is a nurse, regardless of their area of specialization."

The nurses are insisting that the recently imposed work rules endanger the patients. A nurse with 28 years at MCGH described the working conditions as being very stressful. "Sometimes you don't have a secretary, so you're fielding calls, doing paperwork and delivering medication. It's scary now. If you are a surgical nurse and you're pulled out to work in the nursery, it's a completely different area. You're being taken out of your comfort zone. There's a safety issue involved."

Another nurse with 17 years experience commented: "The nurse-patient ratio shouldn't be any higher than six patients per nurse on any floor. There's research that's actually on a government web site that shows the higher nurse-patient ratios to be detrimental to the patient. You have more cases of pneumonia and sepsis, and a higher death rate. Nursing is a hard job. It's demanding and it takes a lot of commitment."

Pickers also expressed disdain for the hospital's double standard of demanding sacrifices from its employees, while engaging in lavish promotional ventures and perks. "The hospital administration tends to be corporate focused," a nurse commented, "They recently spent \$70 million on a marketing campaign. They supply management with free Lincoln SUVs with gas cards. They're making us work harder, but they are giving nothing in return."

According to Local 40 President Vicky Kasper, herself a nurse since 1992, fewer young people are choosing nursing as a profession—one that is labor intensive. She explained that the current medial age of

nurses is between 45 and 50 years. Kasper added that prior to Sunday's rejection vote, the local had conceded on all the other issues. "We gave them everything. The current contract language is the same for shift differential and weekend pay. We took pay increases of 3 percent, 3 percent, 3 percent." Nurses currently make on average \$25 an hour, which amounts to only about \$50,000 a year.

"Our full-time nurses will pay into their health care," she added. "The part-time nurses already pay \$166 per pay period for medical benefits. That's more than \$300 a month. And the hospital owns the plan, so they're making lots of money."

Negotiations are scheduled to resume on Tuesday, August 24, before federal mediator James Hackett. However, a company spokesman has already expressed opposition to any arbitration which involves the company's ability to impose staffing changes. Donald Klinger, vice president of organizational development at MCGH, stated that he was "uncomfortable putting a decision of this magnitude—what is a traditional management right to decide staff size and assignment—to a third party arbitrator. This is uncharted territory, submitting something like this to a binding arbitrator. We think it would be unprecedented."



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