

Hospital workers protest layoffs in Michigan

Carlos Delgado and Esther Galen
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Nurses and other healthcare workers picketed outside Borgess Medical Center in Kalamazoo, angered by the wave of layoffs and cutbacks imposed by Ascension Health Michigan, which owns 14 hospitals in Michigan.

Ascension is the largest US non-profit hospital chain, with 140 Catholic hospitals. Its Michigan hospitals include the St. John-Providence system in southeast Michigan, Crittenton Hospital in Rochester Hills, Genesys in Flint, Borgess in Kalamazoo and St. Mary's in Saginaw.

Another huge hospital corporation, Tenet Medical, has also been cutting jobs in Michigan. Tenet, which is a for-profit system, operates the Detroit Medical Center, the largest hospital complex in the state and the city's biggest single employer.

According to *Crain's Detroit Business*, the job cuts by Ascension could amount to more than 1,000 across the 14 hospitals, and the layoffs could affect nurses, therapists, nurses' aides, patient care techs and transporters. *Crain's* also reported that at the Detroit Medical Center, about 300 have been laid off, including those working in dietary and food service areas, clerks in nursing units, support staff and middle managers in clinical departments. The DMC has laid off waves of workers over the past several years.

Some of the driving forces of the hospital cuts are federal funding cuts, increases in uncompensated care because of cutbacks to Medicaid and Obamacare, a declining number of insured patients and more patients who cannot pay the balance of their bills even when they have insurance.

At Borgess Medical Center in Kalamazoo, between 60 and 70 nurses were laid off effective Sunday, March 4, sparking the picket line protest the following day. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke with some of the nurses as they marched outside the hospital.

One nurse, Linda, said, "Ascension wants to change

the staffing so that it's more unsafe, where nurses will take care of too many patients. And we've gotten rid of a lot of the auxiliary staff. So we are protesting that. It's not safe. We want to do a good job. It's hard to do a good job when you don't have the resources. We're not a factory. We're people who care about the patients. We don't even have people to answer the phones anymore. We need the auxiliary staff, too. We're all a big team, and they keep cutting from our team. It's not right."

Anne Miller, a critical care nurse, had her job eliminated and had to apply for another position within the hospital. "At one point they said that we would be one to four ratio on another floor," she said. "And they cut that back and made it one to five. And that floor got to the point where it was just a little too busy and chaotic. And everybody was terribly sick, to the point of being critically sick. And there were lots of people I sent to critical care. It just got to the point where it was unsafe. And they cut down the nurses' aides, which made more work for the nurses to do."

She said that patients in critical care had been intubated and then waited as long as four hours for a bed because of the strain on facilities. She added that even a nurse to patient ratio of one to three was "next to impossible" for critical care nurses. "You have five or six IV pumps running, people beeping on ventilator. And those drips can't stop, because if they stop, they could die. It makes it hard to be able to care for people when you can't do a good enough job. I'll leave feeling horrible that I didn't do what I was supposed to do. And for a true nurse, you might as well just slap me. Punch me in the face to know that I've left when I didn't do a good job that I was supposed to do. That hurts me."

Anne Miller dismissed the claims by Ascension that there is "no money" to fund adequate staffing levels. "I think they're making themselves look extremely

stupid. Because of the fact that, on the same day they posted they're going to make all these cuts, they announced a \$35 million surgical suite that they're going to build. So you don't have a little extra funding to keep the nurses we have? That sounds a little dumb."

She pointed to reports that Ascension CEO Tony Tersigni now makes \$17 million a year: "That's a lot of money. I will probably never see that in my entire life in my own salary. I will work my entire life, and I will never see \$17 million. That's disgusting. That's ridiculous. It's a terrible, terrible thing."

She continued, "I think it's terrible that people of low economic status can't get the help that they need. They can't get the basic screenings that they need, which is sad. It's really, really sad. People die. People die all the time. Cancer diagnoses that were, 'Oh, I've had a headache for the last six months, but I was afraid to go in and do something about it.' They don't have any insurance. They have no place to go, nothing to do. And then they come in, and they're dead."

Joni Kester, another critical care nurse, said the cuts in staffing would endanger the patients. "We've been working lately with minimum staff here, and even less than minimum staff," she said. "And it's unsafe. Patients are suffering for it. Ascension has 'acceptable losses.' That's their term. That refers to patient deaths. So there are going to be 'acceptable losses'? No, we don't accept that. There doesn't need to be acceptable losses because there's not enough staff. That's just wrong."

Like the other nurses, she had heard the reports of the bonanza for CEO Tony Tersigni: "In 2014 he made \$17 million, and \$10 million of that was bonuses that he got for cutting. It's got to stop. Maybe he should take not so many bonuses and help patients a little more.

"The rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer and not taken care of. But all the rich people seem to have wonderful health care. They have way more than they need. The funny part is, if they had to come to the hospital, they would want to be taken care of as appropriately as the next person, but they don't want everybody else to have that."

Nearly every hospital in the Ascension system across Michigan has been hit by the layoffs. St. John River District Hospital closed its Intensive Care Unit, laying off 30 workers, and 52 out of 68 staffed beds. There were layoffs at St. John Hospital and Medical Center in

Detroit, Providence Hospital in Southfield, St. John Macomb-Oakland units in Plymouth and Warren, and Crittenton Hospital in Rochester Hills, as well as Borgess.

Ascension officials have declined to discuss the layoffs in any detail, but the nominally nonprofit corporation is proceeding just as ruthlessly in its cost-cutting as any other private capitalist firm. Crittenton improved its finances from a net loss of \$4.7 million in 2016 to a net income of \$9.8 million in 2017, but still is cutting further.

According to *Crain's*, St. John Hospital in Detroit will cut 250 jobs, including nurses, patient care technicians, unit clerks, patient transporters and others in medical-surgical and intensive care units, with some non-medical workers being replaced by lower-paying contractors who supply patient transport, dietary and housekeeping services.

St. John is also cutting more nursing clerks, inpatient pharmacy technicians, occupational therapists and physical therapists.

Half the unit clerks at Providence Park Hospital in Southfield are to be laid off, and some administrators and mid-level managers will also lose their jobs at several of the hospitals.



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