

Mobilize the working class to defend nurses and secure the right to health care!

Niles Niemuth
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Niles Niemuth is the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for Congress in Michigan's 12th Congressional District. Visit niles2018.com to donate and get involved in the campaign.

The University of Michigan Professional Nurses Council (UMPNC) announced on September 29 that it had reached a tentative agreement with the Michigan Medicine hospital covering 5,700 nurses.

No details of the agreement have yet been released. However, there can be no doubt that the agreement fails to meet nurses' main demands. After threatening nurses with legal action and strike-breaking operations, Michigan Medicine did not suddenly decide to give in.

The nurses at the Ann Arbor-based hospital system have been working without a contract since June 30. On September 14, the nurses voted by 94 percent in favor of a three-day strike authorization. The union, however, has not called a strike and is determined to prevent a real struggle, which is what is required to secure the interests of nurses and win the right to health care for all workers.

Management has sought to reduce the critical nurse-to-patient ratio, which is currently one of the best in the country for nurse staffing. At the same time, Michigan Medicine had proposed a 3 to 4 percent pay increase over the next three years, a raise that falls far short of inflation. This, along with cuts in retirement benefits, amounts to significant concessions at a time when management reported \$103 million in profits in fiscal year 2018.

There is also widespread opposition among nurses to the new Victors Care program, implemented by Michigan Medicine in March of this year, which has created a class-based system of care that provides better service and treatment for wealthy patients who can afford to pay. More than 300 faculty and physicians

have signed a letter protesting this two-tier system.

The main role of the unions, politically aligned with the Democratic Party, is to prevent a struggle that would unite the entire working class behind the nurses to secure their own interests and the right to high-quality health care for all.

The UMPNC is repeating the role of the unions in every outbreak of class struggle in the US. From the wave of statewide teacher strikes, to the Chicago UNITE HERE hotel workers and Kokomo Indiana auto workers contract disputes, to the ongoing UPS contract vote, and the statewide cuts to Michigan Ascension hospital workers earlier this summer, the unions have worked to suppress the outbreak of opposition among workers and impose contracts in line with the demands of management and the state.

As the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for Congress in Michigan's 12th district, I strongly support the struggle of the nurses and all hospital staff who play a vital role in the health and well-being of hundreds of thousands of patients each year. They should not accept any cuts or increased workload, or be forced to give preferential treatment to the rich through the Victors Care program.

However, to ensure that these rights are defended, the nurses need to take the course of the struggle into their own hands and broaden it by linking up with other sections of the working class. This requires the formation of independent rank-and-file nurses' and hospital workers' committees to advance their own demands, including:

- The process of reviewing, debating and voting on the contract should be completely transparent, with two weeks for nurses to study and discuss the agreement.
- Nurses should not accept any cuts in benefits and must secure a large increase in pay. The university is

awash in profits, and any claim that cuts are necessary is a lie. All proposed cuts, tier-systems, inadequate wage increases, or workload increases are an attempt by management, with the assistance of the union, to deepen and normalize the attacks on health care workers and patient access to quality health care.

- End the Victors Care program. The program is part of a national campaign by the ruling class and both the Democratic and Republican parties to ration care and impose increased costs on workers.

The interests of nurses cannot be separated from the fight to ensure the working class's social right to health care. Increased workloads and other attacks on nurses are connected to the drive by the ruling class to reduce health care costs for corporations and the state.

This is a bipartisan policy. The Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) was fraudulently presented by the Democrats and the unions as a major progressive health care reform. In fact, its main aim was to shift the burden of health care from corporations to individuals, through the requirement that workers purchase insurance from private insurance companies.

Big business has seized on the ACA to shift retirees and active workers to private insurance exchanges. In place of employer-administered health plans, more and more workers are forced to rely on an inadequate health care stipend to purchase substandard private insurance. The Trump administration is escalating the attack on health care, while handing out more than one trillion dollars in tax cuts to the rich.

There is no solution to the massive health care crisis in the United States that does not take on the domination of health care by giant pharmaceutical and insurance companies, which operate under the ever-present whip of Wall Street and its demands for higher profits and dividends.

These giant corporations must be expropriated, and the wealth of the financial aristocracy seized to finance emergency measures to address the health care crisis and establish a system of universal health care, guaranteed as a basic social right.

The trillions of dollars wasted on war, bank bailouts and tax cuts for the rich should be used to fund a universal health care system. Enough wealth is created by the labor of the working class every year to provide good wages and full benefits for all health care workers and to guarantee high quality health care to all.

The fight for universal health care is the fight or socialism, that is, a society run on the basis of social need, not private profit. This requires the political mobilization of the entire working class against the Democrats and Republicans, the twin parties of the corporations and the rich.

I encourage all nurses, health care workers, service workers, students and youth to attend my meeting this Wednesday evening, "Health Care and the Rights of the Working Class," and discuss a socialist strategy for defending the rights of the working class. It is being held in Ann Arbor, October 3 at 7 p.m. at U of M Mason Hall, room 1437.

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