

Toledo, Ohio workers complete first week of strike vs. Mercy Health St. Vincent

Shannon Jones
13 May 2019

Nurses and support staff at Mercy Health St. Vincent Medical Center in Toledo, Ohio are continuing a strike that began May 6 over wages, health care benefits and understaffing. In addition to nurses, the strikers include dietary workers, lab technicians, medivac and EMS workers, custodial workers and others.

Scores of pickets continue to line the sides of Cherry Street in front of the hospital as a steady stream of cars and trucks offer support by honking horns.

The strikers, who are members of the United Auto Workers, are opposing an insulting wage offer of one percent and demands by management for the right to unilaterally impose increases in out-of-pocket employee health care costs. A major issue that has emerged is the question of staffing. Strikers have told the *World Socialist Web Site* that patient care has suffered due to the overwork of staff, who are often forced to work extended shifts and face hundreds of hours each year on call.

Management has hired strikebreakers to maintain hospital operations and is relying on the UAW to contain and isolate the strike. To date the UAW has opposed any effort to mobilize support from other sections of workers in the city including thousands of workers at the Fiat Chrysler Jeep complex and hospital workers at other area Mercy hospitals, including St Anne Hospital and St. Charles Hospital in the suburb of Oregon, and hospitals owned by its rival, ProMedica.

The determined action of the Toledo hospital workers has drawn the attention of a host of Democratic Party officeholders, including Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown and presidential hopeful Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. While claiming their “solidarity” with strikers, Brown and Sanders are part of a Democratic Party establishment that has overseen an enormous attack on healthcare, including passage of the Affordable Care

Act aimed at shifting the cost of healthcare onto the shoulders of workers while increasing the output of medical workers.

The Democratic Party is terrified of the growing mood of anger and militancy in the working class over declining living standards and massive social inequality. Their intervention is aimed primarily at shoring up the credibility of the corrupt UAW bureaucracy, which has been wracked by a scandal that has seen four top leaders sentenced to prison for taking bribes from Fiat Chrysler.

Ohio Democratic Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur held a prayer vigil Saturday with ministers, union officials and officials of the NAACP in which she called for a resumption of talks.

Meanwhile, Toledo’s Democratic Mayor Wade Kapszukiewicz is putting pressure on the UAW to shut down the strike, declaring, “The time has come to bring this to closure.” Kapszukiewicz said, adding that union and management “need to be willing to give in, to budge on this, or it’s just a show.”

In fact, the UAW only called the strike after extending the old contract for months. Prior to walking out, workers in all bargaining units returned overwhelming strike votes, expressing their determination to resist management’s demands.

The strike by Toledo hospital workers is the latest manifestation of a continuing wave of workers’ struggles in the US and internationally. It follows strikes by teachers in Los Angeles, Sacramento and Oakland in California, Denver, Colorado, the state of Oregon and the Carolinas as well as 300,000 teachers in Poland. Last week, workers for ride share companies Uber and Lyft carried out coordinated global strikes and protests against poverty-level wages. Some 40,000 healthcare workers in the University of California

system have set May 16 for a one-day strike.

On Thursday, hundreds of nurses at Providence Sacred Heart Medical Center in Seattle demonstrated over stalled contract negotiations for 1,900 staff. Providence is demanding changes to sick-time benefits and is resisting hiring additional nurses.

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics in the month of April alone there were 5 major strikes involving a total of 60,000 workers resulting in 289,500 lost man-days of work. That compares to 25,000 workers idled and 440,000 man-days lost in all of 2017.

Mercy Health is typical of the giant hospital chains that more and more predominate in the US and globally. Formed through a merger by Cincinnati-based Mercy Health and Bon Secours Health System of Maryland, it is the fifth largest Catholic health system in the US with locations in eight states. Nominally a nonprofit, it functions as a big business generously rewarding top executive such as CEO John Starcher Jr., who pocketed some \$5.6 million in total compensation, according to Mercy's 2017 federal 990 filing. Fifteen other executives earned payouts in excess of \$1 million each. Mercy had over \$2 billion in assets with \$4.4 billion in revenue.

Fatigue due to overwork is a growing problem among nursing staff. According to press reports, some Mercy nurses were on call in excess of 2,000 hours last year; most of the time they were asked to come back or stay after their shifts ended. The hospital has extended on-call hours as a way to reduce the need for hiring additional staff.

A lawsuit filed by the husband of an Ohio nurse working for Mercy Health Group who died in a 2011 car crash alleged that she was literally worked to death. Driving home after an extended shift at her hospital in Cincinnati, she apparently fell asleep, veered of the road and hit a tree. She had told other nurses she was "really stressed" and had not eaten.

Such cases could probably be magnified many times over. Fatigue also undermines patient care, where a mistake such as administering the wrong drug or matching the wrong blood type could endanger a patient's life.

A striking nurse told the *World Socialist Web Site* that while at the Mercy Cancer Center there used to be four to five nurses for every 16-24 patients this year it has been 32-35 with the same number of nurses. "I've

worked 26 hours straight without relief and had to sleep in my car for six hours before I could drive home safely," the veteran nurse told the WSWS.

With contracts for 156,000 autoworkers at Ford, General Motors and Fiat Chrysler set to expire in mid-September, the UAW is anxious to bring the strike at Mercy Health St. Vincent to an end before it inspires a broader movement. Autoworkers are determined to fight the wave of plant shutdowns, including the recent closure of the Lordstown, Ohio plant, and win back concessions surrendered by the UAW, in particular the multi-tier wage system and the spread of temporary part-time work.

The continued inaction of the UAW in the face of the open strikebreaking by management underscores the need for hospital workers to mobilize independently to take decisive action to break the isolation of their struggle. This includes mobilizing Jeep workers and workers at area hospitals to carry out mass picketing and to spread the strike. A rank-and-file strike committee should be elected from among the most trusted militant workers to organize and lead this fight. We encourage workers interested in learning more about rank-and-file committees to contact the WSWS.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact