

Strong support for Toledo hospital workers as UAW isolates strike

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The strike by 2,200 nurses and support staff at Mercy Health St. Vincent Medical Center in Toledo, Ohio, is continuing into its second week.

The courageous stand taken by nurses, dietary workers, EMS staff, technicians and other hospital workers has the broad support of workers throughout the Toledo area and around the country. A glimpse of this can be seen in the near-constant blaring of horns by drivers passing the workers' picket at the hospital's entrance. Local residents have started Gofundme pages and sent in cash donations to help offset strikers' loss of income.

"The whole city of Toledo supports us—we take care of them on a daily basis. We've had patients come out from Perrysburg and surrounding towns to give us their support," one medical technician on the picket told the *World Socialist Web Site* yesterday.

Hospital management has shown no intention of backing down from its demands, which would limit pay increases to a derisory 1 percent and allow unilateral imposition of out-of-pocket health care expenses on hospital workers. Management also wants to maintain the regime of overwork and "on-call" shifts, which routinely push the working day for many workers to 12 or even 16 hours or more.

"We do double shifts, 13-hour days, because of staff shortages," one dietary worker told WSWS reporters. She said wages for some positions in her department start out as low as \$10 per hour.

Kate, a nurse's assistant, said that nurses are "frozen"—that is, forced to stay at work after their shift ends, which the hospital can legally do for up to 16 hours.

A registered nurse told the WSWS, "We have no lunch breaks, and we are on call constantly. This creates safety issues not only for us, but for the patients. Mercy is not living up to its mission."

Asked why she thought workers throughout the country were beginning to fight back against wage and benefit

cuts and job losses, she said, "I think it's the youth. Not that injustice hasn't always been around, but now you have things like social media. And the younger generation, we were not taught to accept things as they are, but to say how we really feel."

Many workers are particularly angry at the hospital's proposal for a \$15,000 deductible for their health care plans, which would render their insurance virtually useless except in catastrophic cases.

Chris, a dietary worker, explained that his crew is so short-staffed that he has to work four different positions: "I cook food, do catering, clean the coolers, work in the front. We didn't even get our 1 percent raise we were supposed to get in February. I make \$14 per hour after five years on the job, and that just doesn't go far at all, with all the stuff coming out of our checks. I have to work a second job at a cafe in order to make ends meet."

A group of workers scoffed when the \$1.7 million salary of Mercy CEO John Starcher and the salaries of other top executives were raised. "What do they even do? I've never seen them," one said.

In comments to the press on Monday, St. Vincent President Jeff Dempsey bragged that management has been able to keep the hospital operating through the use of scab labor. The hospital is paying a staffing company significant sums, in addition to pulling nurses from other Mercy hospitals, to keep the hospital running during the strike. The use of strikebreakers has created dangerous conditions inside the hospital. "People on the inside tell us it's a shit show in there," the previously quoted technician said.

She added, "They need to show us technicians more respect. Without blood work and other testing, how are you able to administer health care? I've gone through a year of training and gotten a certification for my work, even though I'm not required to do so. Our equipment is nearly 20 years old, and often doesn't work. But our

managers don't get us new equipment."

The ability of management to keep operating the hospital during the strike raises the real danger that management will be able to starve the strikers into submission, in spite of the significant public support for the strikers.

Responsibility for this state of affairs lies with the United Auto Workers union (UAW), which has done nothing to mobilize the immense support for the strikers or to broaden their struggle.

The UAW worked to prevent a walkout as long as possible by extending the previous contract several times, and only called a strike when management refused to budge from what it termed its "last, final offer." The international union does not have a single reference to the strike on its website, even though it is taking place only an hour from the UAW headquarters in Detroit.

There is enormous potential to develop the strike into a broader struggle in defense of jobs and living standards. The strike takes place amid the resurgence of strike activity in the United States, involving the highest number of workers in more than 30 years. This is part of a growing counter-offensive by the working class globally.

While the rise is mostly due to the wave of strikes among public school workers, the health care sector has seen within the last year a strike by UC hospital workers in California, a limited strike by 4,000 mental health workers at Kaiser Permanente, and a strike vote by 6,000 nurses at the University of Michigan hospital in Ann Arbor. Negotiations with nearly 2,000 hospital workers in Seattle are currently stalled over staffing issues. On Thursday, May 16, 39,000 University of California Medical Center service and patient care technicians are set to conduct a one-day strike against outsourcing.

A broader struggle is precisely what the UAW wants to avoid. The nurses must be warned: The UAW is preparing a sell-out of their struggle. This is the meaning of the statement Monday by Bruce Baumhower, president of UAW local 12, reported in the *Toledo Blade*, when he stated, "There's been a lot of conversations since that [April 10] date and they've reminded us that this was their last best and final offer. I've been doing this a long time and I'm confident that if they want to continue productive dialogue, we can get an agreement."

Autoworkers at the nearby Fiat Chrysler Toledo Jeep Assembly Complex, who are also in Local 12, already know the playbook that the UAW is working from. In 2015, they, along with Chrysler workers around the country, voted down the UAW-negotiated contract, which

contained massive concessions, by a two-to-one margin. The UAW responded by forcing autoworkers to vote on virtually the same contract a second time, which narrowly passed amid allegations of voter fraud at Ford.

Autoworkers now know that the UAW bureaucrats who negotiated this contract were taking bribes from the auto company. Four of the top eight UAW executives who negotiated the Chrysler contract have since been convicted on federal bribery charges.

"The union protects the company," a Toledo Jeep worker told the WSWS. "They have stock in Fiat Chrysler. I have never voted yes on a contract there. If I was working at St. Vincent, I would have the workers get together and negotiate directly with the company. You need to demand to read and see the full contract before you vote on it.

"The UAW corruption is terrible," the Jeep worker continued. "The union is just interested in collecting dues. I say, set up a committee of the workers themselves!"

Referring to the UAW bribery scandal, one striking hospital worker said, "That doesn't surprise me. That's how these things work."

This bitter experience has been repeated in the wave of teachers' strikes, where each time the unions have forced through betrayals that resolved none of the fundamental issues. Moreover, the teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma and other states were only able to mount these strikes because they organized themselves outside of the union on social media. The return of the class struggle in the United States is driving workers more and more openly into conflict with these outlived organizations, which no longer function under the democratic control of the rank and file.

To carry their struggle forward and to prevent a betrayal, Toledo hospital workers must move now to take the strike out of the hands of the UAW bureaucracy by forming rank-and-file committees, and begin establishing lines of communications with other sections of workers, including health care workers throughout the country and autoworkers, in order to expand their struggle. The *World Socialist Web Site* is ready to assist workers wanting to build rank-and-file committees.



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