

As UAW starts closed-door talks with management

Toledo hospital strikers call for broader mobilization

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With negotiations set to resume today in the strike by nearly 2,000 Mercy Health St. Vincent Medical Center nurses and hospital staff in Toledo, Ohio, strikers remain determined not to back down on their demands.

The strikers, members of the United Auto Workers, struck May 6 after more than eight months of futile negotiations. They are opposing conditions of brutal overwork, the further undermining of their inadequate health benefits and management's derisory offer of a one percent wage increase.

With management continuing hospital operations with strikebreakers, the urgent task facing Mercy Health workers is to expand their struggle and break out of the straitjacket being imposed by the UAW. The enormous potential for waging a broader struggle was demonstrated Thursday when hundreds of workers from the Fiat Chrysler Toledo Jeep complex, mobilized via Facebook, joined the picket line. Strikers told the WSWS that they had gotten support from workers at the Libbey Glass factory as well as teachers, post office workers, truck drivers and staff from other hospitals as far away as Lansing, Michigan.

Strikers said they were in favor of expanding their struggle, but the UAW is deliberately limiting the strike. Workers pointed out that the UAW wasn't even picketing the employee entrance in the back, where strikebreakers come into the hospital.

The UAW is anxious to contain the strike at Mercy Health to prevent it from sparking a broader struggle. Last week, 1,100 auto parts workers at Faurecia in Saline, Michigan, 48 miles from Toledo, voted to strike as the May 31 contract deadline approaches. And in mid-September, the contracts expire for 155,000 GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers—including at the Toledo Jeep Assembly Plant—and workers are determined to recoup

years of UAW-backed concessions and oppose plant closings and layoffs.

On Friday, UAW President Gary Jones held a brief press conference and then headed to the Toledo picket line for a photo opportunity. Jones offered to meet with Mercy Health CEO John Starcher to resolve the strike.

At the same press conference, UAW Local 12 President Bruce Baumhower, commenting nervously on the outpouring of community support for the Mercy Health workers, said, “rather than see this thing escalating, it's time to see this thing de-escalating and getting back to the table and doing some bargaining.”

Meanwhile, UAW Local 2213 President Sue Pratt, head of the nurses local in Toledo, refused to address directly a question from the floor asking her to spell out the union's position on the issues of staffing and patient safety. Instead she replied, “We are going to try to come up with some creative solutions, but we have to have partnership.”

“Creative solutions,” is a code word long employed by the UAW for colluding with management in cutting costs and increasing workers' output.

With the strike now in its third week, the UAW is set to begin doling out miserly strike support payments of \$250 for the first time this week. This from a union sitting on close to \$1 billion in assets.

A veteran hospital technician who wished to remain anonymous told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she was suspicious of the UAW. “I want someone from the outside to be there. We have to make our demands known. We want to be part of the negotiations.”

She said she was very distrustful of the information workers were getting. “I know there is corruption. I have a whole lot of questions for the UAW. How come there can only be certain people in the negotiations? I want to know what's being said.

“Why are we only holding picketing in a limited number of locations?” she asked. “We need to hold big rallies with Jeep workers and other workers. I told a head person, ‘I feel you are not fighting in my favor.’”

The worker continued, “I am not going back under the wrong terms. My biggest demands are benefits, not just money. You need health insurance to keep yourself healthy as well as a fair income. Time away from work is also important.

“I have given my life here. It is crazy we don’t have good benefits.”

The absurdity of healthcare workers for a giant hospital conglomerate with \$2 billion in assets not having decent healthcare highlights the reactionary and irrational character of for-profit medicine. Far from opposing this, the UAW negotiated to take over the provision of retiree healthcare from the auto companies, getting control of a multibillion-dollar trust fund financed by company stock. UAW officials who got lucrative posts on the trust fund quickly cut retiree health care benefits.

In 2015, the UAW offered to take over the provision of health care for current employees as well, but this provoked widespread opposition from workers who voted down the sellout by a two-to-one margin, forcing the UAW and the auto bosses to drop this demand. The UAW then used lies, intimidation and outright voting fraud to push through a second deal. It has come out since that top negotiators, including UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell, were bribed to push through the pro-company deal.

Like the automakers, the giant hospital chains are determined to offload their health care obligations onto the backs of workers.

In seeking to isolate and wear down the Mercy Health St. Vincent strike, the UAW is working from a timeworn playbook. After forcing workers to stay on the job for months past the contract expiration date, the union finally calls a limited strike to let steam out. Union members are kept in the dark about negotiations until a “settlement” is suddenly announced. Workers are then sent back to work without the opportunity to read the full text of the contract or having time to discuss it among themselves. The union distributes “highlights” that fail to mention hidden concessions and a snap ratification vote is scheduled.

This underscores the need for Mercy Health workers to take the conduct of the strike into their own hands. A Toledo Jeep worker told the WSWS, “Why isn’t ProMedica striking? Fairmount, the other hospitals? Don’t trust the UAW. They will get a better deal out of it

for themselves than what you get.

“In 2015, we were lied to and blackmailed. They should read out loud the contract so there can be no excuses. There should be no hidden stuff.”

Mercy Health workers need to recognize that they are not alone. Their fight is part of a growing wave of anger and militancy by workers in the US and globally against an outmoded and reactionary capitalist system that denies masses of people basic benefits like decent healthcare. Meanwhile, capitalism enriches billionaires like Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, who own more wealth than the poorest half of the US population all combined.

The vital question is the building of a new leadership to unite and mobilize this immense social force of the working class in a struggle against this tiny wealthy elite. In 1934, workers in Toledo rallied behind the Auto Lite strikers to win a historic victory that galvanized the working class in the United States. The traditions of that great struggle still live in the working class and must be revived.

Workers need to take matters into their own hands by creating a rank-and-file strike committee to oversee negotiations and to conduct a serious battle against management. Mercy Health workers should fight to spread the strike to other Mercy Health facilities as well as hospital chains like Pro Medica. Mass picketing should be organized to halt management strikebreaking.

The struggle by Mercy Health workers raises the need for an independent political strategy by the working class against the two corporate-controlled parties—the Democrats and Republicans—and to fight for socialism. This includes taking profit out of medicine by nationalizing the giant pharmaceutical, insurance, hospital and medical equipment corporations, and transforming the health care industry into a public service, collectively owned and democratically controlled by working people.



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