

UAW continues to isolate workers

Mercy Health workers continue strike as management digs in

Shannon Jones
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After more than 18 days on strike, nurses, medical technicians and other healthcare workers at Mercy Health St Vincent Medical Center in Toledo, Ohio confront a management that has dug in its heels while workers have been effectively abandoned by the United Auto Workers.

Three negotiating sessions this week produced no resolution to the strike by nearly 2,000 hospital workers. The main outstanding issues revolve around understaffing and forced overtime, wages and employer demands for increased out-of-pocket payments for healthcare.

While the necessity for action is urgent, the strike has been isolated by the UAW. None of the other facilities in the giant healthcare chain have been struck or even picketed, and strikebreakers are being allowed to pass unhindered into St Vincent. This despite an outpouring of support for the embattled healthcare workers by autoworkers and other workers all over Toledo.

Workers from the massive Fiat Chrysler Jeep complex have visited the picket line and an impromptu rally last week drew hundreds. However, the UAW has not sought to mobilize this support in any meaningful way. This week the union, which is sitting on a \$760 million plus strike fund, began doling out miserly \$250 weekly strike paychecks.

Mercy Health is part of a global operation with access to vast resources. The hospital chain completed a merger with Bon Secours in September, creating the fifth largest Catholic health system in the US. It set a goal of reaching \$8 billion in revenue and \$293 million in operating income within its first year. The health system has a reported 45,700 full-time employees at 43 hospitals in seven states. Bon Secours Mercy Health is

one of the top five employers in the state of Ohio, with 33,500 employees in the Ohio-Kentucky region.

According to a recent report, Bon Secours Mercy Health has signed a letter of intent to acquire the largest private healthcare provider in Ireland, Bon Secours Health System, with five acute-care hospitals in Cork, Galway, Limerick, Tralee and Dublin.

Negotiations in the Mercy Health strike resumed Monday under the auspices of a mediator but adjourned after three days with no resolution. According to press reports, management “agreed to all terms previously agreed to by both sides during the previous 10 months of negotiation” as well as some new “solutions.”

The new terms included minor changes regarding reductions in on-call hours and limiting out-of-pocket maximums for healthcare, and no further increases in insurance deductibles in 2019 and 2020. UAW officials said that the hospital refused to address the issue of increased staffing in a manner that would hold management accountable for failure to abide by terms. Previous promises by Mercy Health to address this issue have proven worthless.

Despite its objections, the UAW said that it would take the offer to the membership for a vote. However, Mercy insisted that the UAW formally recommend its proposal, which the UAW, fearing total destruction of its credibility, refused to do. Management then withdrew its offer.

It is not possible to win any serious concessions from management on the basis that the UAW is conducting the strike, limiting it to one work location and refusing to mobilize a broad fight. Any contract reached on this basis can only represent a betrayal and defeat.

Mercy Health St Vincent workers are addressing

issues that confront healthcare workers across the US and internationally. The issue of staffing arises because it is generally cheaper for healthcare providers to overwork existing staff than to hire and train new people, despite the physical toll and increased exposure of patients to the risk of medical mistakes.

Mercy Health workers say that forced overtime and extended periods of being on call make it impossible to provide quality healthcare. Some report only getting a few hours of sleep before returning to work and facing demanding tasks requiring acute faculties.

Mandatory overtime is a widespread issue in healthcare. Eighteen states now have laws mandating some restrictions. There have been strikes or protests by nurses in at least six states over the past year over the issues of staffing and mandatory overtime. A bill that would permit nurses to refuse overtime has been introduced in the Ohio legislature, but is strongly opposed by the Ohio Hospital Association.

The strike at Mercy Health is part of a continuing strike movement in the US, that has seen walkouts by teachers this year as well as strikes by healthcare workers, including 25,000 University of California service and patient care technicians who carried out a system-wide one-day strike in April. Low pay and benefits as well as job overloading were major issues.

The strike by UAW-organized nurses in Toledo takes place in advance of the start of negotiations for 150,000 US autoworkers at Ford, General Motors and Fiat Chrysler whose contracts expire in September. Autoworkers are determined to win back concessions surrendered by the UAW as a result of corrupt, concessions-laden contracts signed by the UAW.

Four of the top UAW officials who negotiated the 2015 contract with Fiat Chrysler have since pleaded guilty to receiving bribes from management aimed at securing favorable contract terms, including the expanded use of temporary part time workers (TPT) who receive few if any benefits and have no contract rights.

A young second-tier worker at the Fiat Chrysler Jeep complex said he and other autoworkers had been visiting the picket lines to show their solidarity with the striking Mercy Health workers. He said he had been a TPT worker for several years before becoming full time.

He called the treatment of hospital workers by Mercy

Health “insane.”

“They are putting profits over patients. I have a couple of friends who work at St Vincent. I see on Facebook that management is offering to pay nurses \$120 an hour instead of just doing the right thing.

“There is no shortage of money. It’s the same with Fiat Chrysler; they are making lots of profits.”

He said he agreed with the *World Socialist Web Site* that the struggle of the Mercy Health workers needed to be expanded. “There are multiple hospitals in Toledo.” Shutting down just one “is not really hurting them,” he said.

“My girlfriend asked me ‘why are the other hospitals not on strike?’ She is right. It would be like us here at Jeep just shutting down one wing of the plant.”

He said that he and other workers at Jeep, especially TPTs were very critical of the UAW. “The union hasn’t helped us at all.” He said that if a TPT worker approached a union representative, “they would just blow them off. It is sickening.”

Many nurses, he observed, were not aware of the UAW corruption scandal involving the bribery of top union officials by Fiat Chrysler to rig contracts. “It affected us directly and personally. What happens with autoworkers affects everyone.”

The conduct of the fight by Mercy Health workers is following a well established pattern where the unions sanction limited strikes only to leave workers isolated, eventually wearing down their resistance and imposing concessions.

The WSWs urges Mercy Health workers to study the experiences of the recent teachers strikes in Los Angeles and Oakland, California and other cities. The struggle cannot be left in the hands of the corrupt UAW. A rank-and-file strike committee must be organized to take measures to appeal to broader sections of workers, autoworkers, teachers and healthcare workers across the city to expand the struggle and organize mass picketing.

Workers interested in learning more should contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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