

UAW calls for contract vote by Mercy Health support and technical staff in a bid to isolate nurses

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The United Auto Workers has scheduled a snap vote on a contract proposal by striking medical technicians at Mercy Health St Vincent Medical Center in Toledo, Ohio. The vote, which is scheduled for Sunday, will not include the nurses who are also on strike, but who belong to a separate bargaining unit.

Nearly 2,000 medical staff at Mercy Health, members of the United Auto Workers, struck on May 6 after months of fruitless negotiations over medical premiums, staffing levels and wages. The strike has won broad sympathy and support among workers in the area who are glad to see resistance to concessions and overwork.

The main issues for nursing staff are heavy workloads, forced overtime and on-call policies. Nurses complain of chronic understaffing on long hours of mandatory overtime, undermining the health and well-being of nurses and the care of patients. Hospital management has extended on call hours as a way of avoiding hiring additional personnel. Some Mercy Health nurses were on call as much as 2,000 hours last year.

Mercy Health, which merged with Bon Secours last year to form Bon Secours Mercy Health, is the fifth-largest Catholic healthcare system in the US, with 43 hospitals and 57,500 employees in seven states and some \$8 billion in annual net revenue. With enormous financial resources at its disposal, management has taken an intransigent stance, seeking to wear down the resistance of strikers. They have kept the hospital open during the strike by using scabs at the cost of as much as \$120 an hour.

The decision by the UAW to organize a separate vote by medical technicians, who comprise about 50 percent

of the hospital staff at Mercy Health St. Vincent, is a stab in the back, an effort by union officials to divide and undermine the strike in order to shut it down. The medical technicians and support staff could return to work as early as Monday if the contract is ratified, effectively amounting to an attempt to force the medical technicians to cross the picket line against the nurses.

The new contract proposals were put together with the help of a federal mediator, with the talks closed to rank-and-file UAW members and held at a secret location. Management withdrew a previous contract offer which it claimed addressed the issue of on-call hours, which UAW officials said they would present to the membership for a vote, but would not make a formal recommendation for acceptance.

Since the walkout began on May 6, the UAW has done everything it can to limit its effectiveness. It has restricted picketing to the front entrance to the hospital and made no effort to stop strike breakers. No effort has been made to win support from workers at other Mercy Health facilities in the area and no mass rallies or mass picketing have been organized.

While a host of national and local politicians, including Democratic presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders and Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown, made their way to the picket line over the past three weeks, they have abandoned and isolated the Mercy Health strikers.

In the latest attempt to throw dust in the eyes of workers, Republican Ohio state legislator Don Manning visited the Mercy Health picket line Friday to promote a bill he has introduced that would ban mandatory overtime for nurses. The bill has been stuck in committee since March and appears to have little

chance of passage.

The decision by the UAW to break up the strike confirms the warnings made by the *World Socialist Web Site* that the union would carry out a betrayal. The UAW is not a workers' organization in any genuine sense of the term, but a corrupt bureaucracy which functions as an agent of management. This has been demonstrated by the federal investigation into the payment of bribes by Fiat Chrysler to the union bureaucrats, which resulted in the bribery convictions of four top negotiators. Millions of dollars in bribes were funneled from the company through the joint UAW-Chrysler National Training Center and other corporatist schemes into the pockets of union executives. UAW President Gary Jones and Vice President Cindy Estrada have also attracted the scrutiny of federal investigators.

Mercy Health workers are not on their own. There is enormous sentiment in the working class for a fight after decades of eroding living standards, attacks on health care and the spread of low-wage, part-time and temporary employment. Strike activity in the United States is at its highest level in 30 years. The strike wave of public school teachers is being joined by growing numbers of health care workers and other sections of the working class as part of a global upsurge of class struggle, including teachers in Poland and maquiladora workers in Mexico.

There is enormous pent-up anger and a mood of rebellion among autoworkers in particular, who have endured one sellout contract after another. With the contract for 150,000 Ford, General Motors and Fiat Chrysler workers set to expire on September 14 and the contract for 1,400 auto parts workers at Faurecia in Saline, Michigan having expired yesterday, the UAW wants to squelch the Mercy Health strike before it encourages a broader strike movement by workers.

To win a decent contract and beat back management's attempts to impose further concessions Mercy Health workers must rely on their own independent strength. That means rejecting UAW-management attempts to divide the workforce and turning out to mobilize the broadest support for the strike, including among workers at other hospitals and other workers coming into struggle such as autoworkers and teachers.

To do this workers must organize a strike committee

independent of the UAW and comprised of the most trusted militant workers. Workers must have representation in negotiations, which must be conducted openly, not in secret. Workers must have adequate time to review any contract proposal and no return to work until all issues are resolved, including the elimination of forced overtime, the hiring of hundreds of additional staff, full-paid employer health benefits and a substantial wage increase to offset the increased cost of living.

Nurses should turn to the historical lessons of the great Toledo Auto Lite strike of 1934 and other experiences of the working class. The strike by nurses and healthcare workers underscores the irrationality of a medical care system based on private profit. The urgent question is to mobilize the growing insurgency of the working class under and independent, socialist, political program aimed at the source of lack of access to health care, low wages, poverty and war: the capitalist system. Workers interested in learning more about this fight should contact the World Socialist Web Site.



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