

“We went out with the nurses, we should go back with the nurses”

Mercy Health strikers in Toledo, Ohio denounce UAW sabotage of their struggle

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Striking Mercy Health St. Vincent hospital nurses and support staff in Toledo, Ohio expressed anger and outrage Sunday as the United Auto Workers conducted a vote on a concessionary contract proposal to split striking workers and send support staff across the picket lines of nurses today.

According to UAW Local 12 officials, who endorsed the sellout deal, support staff and technical workers voted to ratify a new three-year agreement Sunday and are being sent back to work despite the fact that some 950 Mercy Health workers are yet to accept a contract proposal from management.

Nearly 2,000 hospital workers walked out against Mercy Health on May 6 over staffing, forced overtime, long on-call hours, healthcare and wages. Though facing similar issues, the workers, all members of the UAW, are divided into three bargaining units: nurses, technical and service staff.

The union reported that support staff voted by 62 percent and technicians by 84 percent to return to work. If the UAW's figures are accurate and that is certainly not guaranteed, the vote reflects enormous economic pressure and confusion due to the UAW's isolation and sabotage of the strike. The UAW only paid workers \$250 a week in strike pay out of the union's \$760 million Strike and Defense Fund, which has long been a slush fund for Solidarity House.

Despite broad public support, the workers were forced to fight their battle alone against Bon Secours Mercy Health, the fifth largest Catholic healthcare system in the United States with billions of dollars in assets, which brought in strikebreakers from across the US. The UAW has thousands of members in Toledo and the surrounding area, but never called a single mass rally or mass picket.

While the national UAW has not issued a statement on

the vote, the splitting of the Mercy Health nurses and support staff has all the earmarks of a strike-breaking operation hatched at the UAW's misnamed Solidarity House headquarters in Detroit. With a strike vote by Faurecia auto parts workers in Saline, Michigan and contracts for 150,000 GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler autoworkers expiring in three-and-a-half months, the last thing UAW bureaucrats want to see is workers linking up their struggles.

Mercy Health support staff arriving for an informational meeting at the UAW Local 12 union hall in Toledo Sunday told *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* reporters that they were upset at being encouraged by union officials to return to work without the nurses. Local 12, an amalgamated local that covers workers at the local Fiat Chrysler Jeep complex as well, is the bargaining agent for technical and service workers.

One veteran support worker with 29 years said, “We went out with the nurses, we should go back with the nurses.” She said she was voting “no” on the agreement. “We weren't out for nearly four weeks for this. It gets worse and worse every year.”

Another worker expressed surprise that local UAW officials were urging ratification. “They didn't seem to think they (nurses) were an issue.”

WSWS reporters distributed copies of a statement, “Reject UAW sellout! Solidarity with the nurses! Expand the strike!” which called for the broadest turn out to other sections of workers including other hospital workers, teachers and the thousands of autoworkers in the area at General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler plants. It urged the formation of a rank-and-file strike committee to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the strike breaking UAW.

Many workers thanked the WSWS for taking a

principled stand in support of the unity of all hospital workers.

“The whole situation is messed up,” said another support worker. “We all went out together, we should go back as a whole.”

Another worker said, “We had just been told earlier that hospital management was trying to divide us and we shouldn’t fall for it,” adding “now they are doing this,” referring to the vote organized by the UAW. “People gave their lives for this,” she said, expressing dismay at the UAW’s trampling on elementary principles of solidarity.

A central issue for workers in all three bargaining units has been staffing and mandatory overtime. Nurses in particular complain of overwork and long hours. In addition, nursing staff are required to spend large amounts of time on call, essentially destroying any social life.

A support worker told the WSWS, “We witness every day how nurses get treated. They have no time with their families. They are always on call. They miss family events, birthdays, weddings.”

She said that she had voted “no” on the agreement. Asked about the UAW forcing workers to return to work while nurses are still on strike, she said, “It is a tough pill to swallow.” Repeating what many other workers were saying she added, “We all went out as one, we should go back as one.”

Outside the UAW Local 12 union hall in Toledo, the WSWS met Sue Pratt, President of UAW Local 2213, which covers the Mercy Health nurses. She told the WSWS, the UAW had not invited her to speak at the contract information meeting for support staff, but she decided to come to the Local 12 hall anyway.

Pratt, who is a working registered nurse, said the latest proposal from management had not addressed the issues of primary concerns of nurses, such as staffing and on-call hours, and therefore the local had not decided to even bring it to a vote. Nevertheless, she said, the nurses’ unit had not issued a call to the support staff and technicians to reject the UAW move to split the strike.

At the picket line support staff joined nurses in a show of solidarity. One veteran nurse said that when she had first hired in at Mercy Health she had been inspired by management’s professed vision. “It’s all about money now,” she said. “It’s been taken over by corporate greed. The guys in the ivory tower are cutting the guys downstairs.”

Explaining why nurses were opposing Mercy Health’s latest contract proposal, she said, “They were not willing to reduce our on-call hours very much and forced

overtime is still there. That’s an issue of patient safety.

“There were some limits on healthcare spending, but there was still a very high out of pocket expenses. People think because we are healthcare workers, we have good healthcare. In fact, overall, our healthcare is substandard.”

She noted that workers were struggling to live on the miserly strike checks issued by the UAW and a not insubstantial number of strikers had made the decision to return to work. “We are in a difficult position. Finances are difficult. People are being forced to look for other jobs. You have house payments and bills. I am trying to hold on as long as I can.”

When asked about the holding of a separate vote by support staff and technicians, another nurse said, “It is obvious what they are trying to accomplish. They are trying to make us weaker.”

The strike by Mercy Health workers is the largest strike in Toledo in years, if not decades. It has won wide support in the community and is part of a growing radicalization of workers reflected in a sharp increase in the number of strikes nationally and globally.

The moves by the UAW to sabotage the struggle by Mercy Health worker underscores the warnings by the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* about the anti-worker character of this organization. The urgent task facing the working class is the building of new, rank-and-file based organizations of struggle independent of the corporate-controlled unions. Above all, the working class needs an independent political program and leadership aimed at mobilizing millions of workers coming into struggle in the US and internationally in defense of the social rights of the working class and in opposition to the capitalist profit system.



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