

Toledo Mercy Health nurses vote down UAW sellout

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In a sharp rebuke to the United Auto Workers, nursing staff at the Mercy Health St. Vincent Medical Center in Toledo, Ohio voted to reject by a 57 percent margin a sellout contract that the union had attempted to ram down their throats.

In a statement Tuesday night, Mercy Health denounced the nurses' decision. "We believe that the rejection was the result of confusion between [UAW] Local 2213 leaders and the UAW, which resulted in the vote being delayed until this week although nurses returned to work on June 13."

However, there was no "confusion" on the part of the nurses, who saw the deal as virtually identical to the offer they rejected before the strike that in no serious way addressed their demands.

For its part, the UAW expressed barely concealed dismay at the vote, emphasizing the supposed "gains" in the deal, including "pay raises" (a miserable 2 percent), caps on out of pocket health care costs and a reduction (15 percent over 18 months) in on call hours.

The UAW further offered the illusory hope that the Ohio legislature would pass a bill limiting overtime hours of nurses.

The vote to reject followed a decision last week by the UAW to shut down the strike by 950 nurses and order an unconditional return to work without union members being given the opportunity to vote on, let alone consider, the terms of the contract proposal.

The vote by the nurses is a courageous act of defiance against both management and their bought-and-paid-for flunkies in the UAW leadership. It poses the need for nurses to draw certain fundamental lessons of their six-week struggle. The setbacks they have suffered are not due to a lack of determination to fight, but the role of the UAW in attempting to sabotage their struggle.

The precondition for the successful continuation of

their fight is the formation of workplace committees, democratically controlled by the rank-and-file and expressing the interests of hospital workers, not management.

Mercy Health St. Vincent nurses and medical staff, including medical technicians and dietary and support workers, struck on May 6 over a host of issues, including understaffing, mandatory on-call hours and forced overtime. Pay and the rising cost of medical benefits were also in contention.

The hospital workers received broad public support for their stand. Workers clearly saw the fight of the nurses against inadequate pay and deteriorating work conditions as long overdue. This included Fiat Chrysler workers at the Jeep complex in Toledo, whose contract expires in September along with 150,000 workers at the Big Three automaker. These workers face threats of plant closures and layoffs while fighting to recover gains surrendered by the UAW in concessions contracts imposed over the past several decades.

However, from the outset the UAW worked to sabotage the hospital strike, keeping workers isolated. It made no attempt to mobilize support from workers at other Mercy Health facilities, health care giants such as ProMedica or other sections of hospital workers, such as the 13,000 nurses in Minneapolis-St Paul facing a contract expiration. Neither was there any attempt to hinder a massive strikebreaking operation carried out by Mercy Health, which offered scabs a reported \$25,000 bonus for crossing picket lines.

In a stab in the back to nurses, on June 3 the UAW sent some 900 support staff back to work under a separate settlement, forcing them to cross the picket line of nurses, who chose not to vote on management's inadequate offer that failed to seriously address the issue of short staffing.

On June 12, the UAW International announced the unilateral end of the strike in the face of what it claimed were threats by management to permanently replace nurses. While a video statement issued by UAW Region 2B Director Richard Rankin claimed the new agreement contained “significant improvements” over previous management offers, nurses said that was a lie. In fact, the terms in no significant way differ from what workers rejected before the strike.

To add insult to injury, Rankin said that nurses would not go back as a unit, but must wait until individually contacted by management, leaving open the likelihood that more outspoken individuals may be blacklisted.

Media reports offered mainly vague generalities over the terms of the management offer. The claim that the agreement would mandate a 15 percent decrease in on-call hours was widely dismissed by nurses as inadequate.

A nurse who attended the informational meeting at the UAW Local 12 union hall on Saturday expressed shock and outrage over the shutting down of the strike.

“It was emotional,” the nurse told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “A lot of people are angry. The offer was not different from the last offer.

“One of the worst things about it is that we have no protection against overwork. If you are on duty, they can call you and force you to work 16 consecutive hours. That is just not right. We work the entire day and work throughout the night. Then we have to work the next day. That is terrible.

“The strike was never just about the money. We want to take better care of our patients. We do not have enough help to take care of the patients. They give us poor resources.

“It is exhausting. This is a special hospital, in the inner city. It takes a special kind of person to do this work. We need help with more people to do that.

“From what I could see of the contract, we got no relief. They [the UAW] have a lot of excuses for doing what they have done. A lot of it does not make sense.

“The union took away our right to decide and forced us back to work at the moment when we have made the most impact. The union forced us back in there to accommodate the hospital.”

The nurse noted that strikebreakers were on a weekly contract, which expired Friday. “By forcing strikers back on a Friday, the UAW helped save management

considerable money.”

Another nurse told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she rejected claims by the UAW that the new agreement represented an improvement. “It is not true. I did not spend six weeks on strike fighting for this. I feel the hospital won.”

She said there was not “a whole lot of difference” between the proposal they were asked to ratify and management’s original offer. In particular, she pointed to caps on out of pocket medical expenses, saying they were “very high.” She also noted that there were inadequate protections against excessive overtime.

The systematic sabotage of the Toledo hospital strike is not a case of isolated union corruption but expresses the systemic degeneration of the unions into bureaucratic, pro-company organizations.

This experience underscores the urgency of the call by the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* for the building of rank-and-file factory committees in the auto plants in advance of the contract talks this summer between the UAW and the Detroit-based automakers. Any struggle left in the hands of the UAW will lead to betrayal and disaster.

Workers must wage an independent fight to defend jobs and restore all the concessions surrendered in past contracts. This requires the conscious linking of the struggles of autoworkers, hospital workers, teachers, airline workers and other sections of workers in an industrial and political offensive against the corporations and their Democratic and Republican servants in Washington.



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