

Anger and disgust over UAW betrayal of Mercy St. Vincent nurses strike in Toledo, Ohio

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Nurses at Mercy Health St. Vincent Medical Center in Toledo, Ohio have returned to work to find the same brutal management regime in place as before their six-week strike. The United Auto Workers union shut down the walkout on June 12 and sent nurses back to work before they had a chance to vote or even see the agreement the UAW reached with hospital management.

The sellout deal addressed none of the issues that nurses and hospital staff went on strike for, in particular forced overtime, on-call hours and understaffing. For that reason, nurses defiantly voted down the contract by 57 percent.

The failure of management and the union to impose the concessionary agreement provoked mutual recriminations between UAW and Mercy Health officials. In a press statement following the vote Mercy Health attempted to deny the obvious fact that nurses were massively opposed to the contract. Instead they blamed the rejection on “disorder” and “lack of unity” within Local 2213, the bargaining unit for St. Vincent nurses, noting that 200 nurses had chosen to resign from the UAW in the wake of the strike.

The UAW acknowledged that it had urged the nurses to ratify the tentative agreement but then claimed, “the UAW is a democratic union, and it is the members who ultimately decide whether to ratify a CBA... We believe that with further bargaining we can achieve a collective bargaining agreement that the democratic union voice will support.”

As tens of thousands of autoworkers know, the UAW’s pious claim that it is a “democratic union” is an utter fraud. Rank-and-file workers have no control over decisions made by corrupt union officials who

take company bribes and use threats, intimidation and fraud to push through pro-company contracts. In Toledo, the UAW operated as an out-and-out strikebreaker.

As for the union’s claim that a return to the bargaining table would lead to an improved deal, that is nothing but a cynical ploy. The UAW destroyed whatever bargaining leverage nurses had, first by signing separate deals covering hospital staff and technicians, and then by unilaterally calling off the nurses’ strike.

St. Vincent nurses contracted by the WSWS expressed anger and disgust. One noted, “We are under the old contract but why does the hospital need to negotiate when we are back to work? – The UAW made it impossible for nurses to win at all. Management is being very intimidating.” The conditions facing staff at St. Vincent are common to nurses employed throughout the health care industry. The husband of a nurse at ProMedica in Toledo told the WSWS, “12-hour shifts are typical in the nursing industry. There have been days where she’s worked 18 hours straight: 12-hour shifts and 6 hours on call.

“Schedules change all the time. How can you make any plans?”

“The on-call thing is about getting rid of staff. It has nothing to do with volunteering. You have to come in, that’s it.”

There reportedly is a new petition circulating for the decertification of the UAW at St. Vincent. Some have expressed sentiment for affiliating with a national nurses’ union.

While nurses have every right to throw out the scab UAW, the critical question facing nurses and every

section of the working class is the building of new organizations of struggle that are democratically controlled by the rank and file. Workers cannot fight giant corporations as individuals but need a way to mobilize their collective strength to defend their rights in the workplace as well as their broader social interests as workers. For this reason, the WSWS has advanced the call for the building of rank-and-file workplace and factory committees to take over the functions, such as the defense of working conditions and addressing of grievances, long abandoned by the official unions. These rank-and-file committees must vigilantly fight to advance the democratic will of workers against the corporate dictatorship in the workplace. This includes fighting for industrial democracy and workers' control over decisive questions such as staffing and scheduling.

The conduct of the nurses unions, such as the National Nurses United, has been no different than the UAW, as demonstrated by the recent experience of Minneapolis-St. Paul nurses. As organizations based on the defense of the capitalist profit system and the interests and the nation state, all of the unions insist that workers must accept ever declining wages and eroding working conditions to make American businesses competitive on the world arena. This entails a brutal race to the bottom. Part of that was the nurses' union collaboration with President Obama's misnamed Affordable Care Act, which has been used by hospital chains to carry out savage cost cutting and pile additional work on nurses and other health care workers.

The actions of the UAW in relation to the Toledo nurses are not an isolated case of incompetence, but deliberate sabotage. This was demonstrated by the intervention of the UAW to shut down a potentially powerful strike by Faurecia auto parts workers in Saline, Michigan Friday after just 9 hours. Workers were not even informed of the terms of the supposed settlement before being ordered to return to work.

Nurses have again and again argued that their fight is part of a broader struggle in defense of healthcare, pointing to the impossibility of providing adequate patient care under conditions of understaffing and overwork. This is absolutely correct. All across the US, the right to healthcare is under attack.

It was the fight of autoworkers in the 1950s that established the practice of employer-paid health

insurance. Now those supposedly "gold plated" health benefits are being targeted by the Detroit auto companies in the 2019 contract negotiations. This will be used as a spearhead for further assaults on all workers.

That the fight by the nurses has broad political implications was demonstrated by the fact that a host of Democratic and Republican politicians quickly professed their "support" for the nurses, including the supposed "democratic socialist" presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders. In fact, the Democrats intervened not to defend the nurses but to prop up the UAW and pave the way for this sellout.

Nurses have powerful allies: autoworkers, teachers, logistics workers, steelworkers, service workers. But this force must be mobilized in a common struggle. This requires an industrial and political counteroffensive by the working class against both the Democrats and Republicans and the capitalist system, which subordinates the needs of working people to the ever-greater enrichment of the corporate and financial aristocracy. The success of these struggles is bound up with the fight for a socialist program, based on reorganizing society based on production for human need, not profit.

The WSWS encourages St. Vincent nurses and support staff to engage in the widest discussion and draw the lessons of their experiences.



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