

McLaren Macomb Hospital nurses vote overwhelmingly for strike action

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Six hundred nurses at McLaren Macomb Hospital voted by 90 percent on June 29 to go on strike when their current contract expires at midnight on July 27.

The overwhelming vote for a strike by the nurses at the 288-bed hospital in the suburban Detroit community of Mount Clemens, Michigan is the result of the drive by management to intensify the exploitation of the staff at the facility throughout the coronavirus pandemic.

While hospital registered nurses (RNs) have made enormous sacrifices and worked with short staffing and extended hours throughout the public health crisis, saving lives and assisting those infected with the virus, the hospital has used the pandemic to increase the financial payoff for top executives of the multi-billion-dollar McLaren Health Care corporation.

McLaren is a \$6 billion conglomerate that operates 15 hospitals and numerous urgent care centers, physicians' offices, hospice and home health facilities and pharmacies in the lower peninsula of Michigan. The company also runs its own health care insurance division and medical malpractice insurance company. Its network of health care facilities extends from Petoskey, along the northwestern shoreline of Lake Michigan, through the state capitol of Lansing and into Maumee, Ohio, near the city of Toledo.

Macomb McLaren management has attempted to turn the situation around on the nurses, with a company spokesperson telling the news media that the strike vote is an unconscionable attempt "to use the pandemic as leverage at the bargaining table." The company said the nurses had rejected a 15 percent wage increase and a \$2,000 signing bonus.

The nurses have made it clear that McLaren management is attempting to use the pay increases as leverage against their demands for an improvement in

the quality of patient care and an increase in staffing levels. The nurses have also called attention to unsanitary conditions and the failure of management to adhere to COVID-19 protocols inside the hospital.

The company has refused to abide by staffing ratios that were stipulated in the previous contract, claiming that the pandemic absolves them of this responsibility. Meanwhile, nursing staff has dwindled over the past year and nurses are being forced to care for six patients at a time, under conditions where there is no ancillary staff.

In any event, the 15 percent wage increase offered by management would be spread out over the four-year duration of the contract. Under conditions where inflation is currently rising at more than 5 percent a year, this would result in a cut in real wages.

In response to the strike vote, McLaren Macomb management issued a statement attempting to split the nurses from the working class community, declaring: "While the median individual income in Macomb County is approximately \$32,000 (according to the most recent US census data), the average full-time salary for our registered nurses is more than \$75,000 annually."

According to representatives of the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU), the nurses at the suburban Detroit hospital voted to go on strike over "patient safety and nursing morale issues." After the vote, OPEIU Local 40 President Jeffrey Morawski told the media, "With these vote totals, obviously the nurses do not favor McLaren's wholly inadequate proposals that seemingly are designed only to protect McLaren's bottom line."

Morawski added, "A central issue in the negotiations is to provide safe and appropriate nurse-patient ratios, which is the best way to protect our community."

However, the leadership of the OPEIU is proceeding as though the situation facing the nurses at Macomb Hospital is an isolated problem and not connected with the exploitation of the entire staff at McLaren Health System, not to mention the health care workforce at other Detroit area hospital chains such as Beaumont Health and Henry Ford Health System.

According to a report last year by WXYZ Detroit, McLaren Health took in \$146,502,427 in US government aid from the CARES Act passed by Congress in March of 2020, while the company had \$2.18 billion in cash reserves—all while it was furloughing workers during the pandemic.

In a recent IRS filing, McLaren reported that the CEO and president, Philip Incarnati, was paid \$7,278,953, and the top 14 executives were paid a combined total of more than \$20 million.

Meanwhile, in the midst of the contract struggle by the nurses, McLaren Health announced that Chad Grant, the former president of the company's central Michigan region, was being promoted to the position of executive vice president and chief operating officer, no doubt with a salary well above \$1 million. The press release said that Grant had "achieved success in growing volumes and market share and improving the clinical and financial operation of that acute care facility."

The strike vote by nurses at McLaren Macomb Hospital is another indication of the growing movement of workers and professionals across many industries in the US and internationally against decades of attacks by the employers and the government on wages, benefits and working conditions. The struggle at the Macomb hospital must be expanded to the rest of the McLaren Health Care network facilities and among health care workers throughout Michigan and across the country.

The website of the international union does not even mention the strike vote at McLaren Macomb Hospital, which should be taken by the nurses as a warning that the union leadership has no intention of mobilizing broader support among nurses and health care workers behind them.

The fact, moreover, that the OPEIU has confined the strike vote to Macomb Hospital is proof that the union is attempting to isolate the nurses and stifle the efforts of other health care workers to fight McLaren Health Care. The only way that nurses and health care

employees can take forward their fight against the hospital chains is by organizing independent rank-and-file committees that will unite the different sections of health care workers and take the struggle out of the hands of the pro-corporate unions.



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