

Detroit-area nurses give 10-day strike notice at McLaren Macomb Hospital

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Nurses at McLaren Macomb Hospital in Mount Clemens, Michigan gave a 10-day notice to management last Sunday stating that they intend to go on strike if a new contract is not agreed to when the old agreement expires on July 27.

Representatives from Local 40 of the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) informed McLaren that the 530 nurses will walk out if staffing issues at the 228-bed hospital are not resolved by the deadline.

Nurses at McLaren Macomb have been forced to work with a shortage of more than 10 percent of the contractually required staffing levels and have not been able to effectively provide health care services to hospital patients. Hospital management has failed to replace 70 nurses and claimed that this is due to a nationwide nursing shortage.

According to published descriptions of the conditions at the hospital, nurses are being expected to care for up to six patients per shift, including some who are in the intensive care unit (ICU). By comparison, standard hospital care for the ICU is one nurse to one patient.

The nurses voted on June 29 by 90 percent to take strike action against the \$6 billion “non-profit” health care enterprise that operates 15 hospitals and dozens of other medical facilities across Michigan. The conditions facing the nurses at McLaren Macomb are common throughout the health care industry as management groups and boards of directors are focused on the financial performance, which is basis of their enormous compensation packages.

According to a 2018 filing, McLaren Health CEO Philip Incarnati made \$7 million in one year, and at least six others earned \$1 million each. After the nurses voted to take strike action, media representatives of the executives earning these grotesque incomes attempted

to smear the hospital employees by claiming that they were overpaid and earned more than twice as much as the average wage earner in Macomb County.

McLaren management has every intention of attempting to break a strike. In a statement provided to local news media following the 10-day notice from the union, a spokesperson for McLaren Health accused the OPEIU of bargaining in bad faith to “push our nurses on strike.” The corporate representative also falsely claimed that strike action would be illegal.

The company then stated, “Our hospital will remain open and fully operational during OPEIU’s strike, should it occur. We have been preparing for the unfortunate possibility of the union taking nurses away from patients’ bedsides to walk a picket line. We are implementing a comprehensive strike plan to ensure minimal, if any, disruption for those receiving care or visiting our hospital during OPEIU’s strike.”

McLaren Health has also threatened nurses with a discontinuation of their health insurance coverage in the event of a strike.

In response to the threats by the company, OPEIU Local 40 Vice President Dina Carlisle merely said that the union was not bargaining in bad faith and that the union was “truly trying to get a better nurse-to-patient ratio, is the bottom line.”

Throughout the negotiations and lead up to the 10-day strike notice, the leadership of OPEIU Local 40 has pushed the idea that the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) will intervene on behalf of the nurses and process a series of five complaints filed against McLaren Health for violating the law. But these complaints will take months or even years to process, and there is no guarantee that the NLRB will rule in nurses’ favor.

In a statement put out on Wednesday by Local 40

President Jeff Murkowski, Vice President Carlisle and Organizer Leah Derr, the union states, “The NLRB has already prosecuted two of these cases before Administrative Law Judges and we are awaiting decisions. The remaining three cases are scheduled for September trials.”

The OPEIU is doing nothing to unite the McLaren Macomb nurses with the staff at the other 14 hospitals in the McLaren Health network, who are facing the exact same working conditions while the corporation is sitting on billions in cash and making massive executive payouts. Less than one year ago, for example, more than 1,000 nurses at McLaren Flint Hospital voted for strike action over the very same issue of inadequate staffing levels during the fall upsurge in the coronavirus pandemic.

The strategy of placing confidence in the NLRB instead of the independent strength of the nurses and hospital employees is of a piece with the overall program of the national OPEIU, which has not uttered a word about the McLaren Macomb nurses struggle on their website. Instead, the OPEIU is campaigning heavily for the Biden-Harris administration’s Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act legislative initiative that does not even have the support of all the Democrats in Washington D.C. and has little to no chance of ever being enacted.

Assuming it does not reach an agreement at the 11th hour to prevent a strike, the OPEIU will do everything it can to keep the nurses isolated and limit the struggle as much as possible. This is what has already taken place in countless other health care workers strikes across the country this year, including among Chicago area hospital workers, nurses in Worcester, Massachusetts, and most recently in Los Angeles, where the California Nurses Association sent nurse back to work at two hospitals after a token two-day strike.

The only way that the nurses and other employees at McLaren Macomb can take forward the struggle against intolerable working conditions is to organize independently of the OPEIU, build their own rank-and-file committees of action and unite with other sections of the working class in the Detroit-area auto industry and other sectors in a common fight for their basic rights.



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