

Sparrow Health workers in Lansing, Michigan, vote overwhelmingly to authorize strike

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Health care workers at Sparrow Health System in Lansing, Michigan, and its surrounding area voted to authorize strike action by an overwhelming 96 percent majority, in a vote that ended Sunday. The workers have been working without a contract since October 31.

The demands of Sparrow workers include safe staffing levels, cost-of-living adjustments to wages, curtailing of ballooning health care costs and sick time without fear of punishment.

The Michigan Nurses Association (MNA) reported a turnout of nearly 90 percent of the 2,200 workers in the Professional Employee Council of Sparrow Hospital (PECSH), which covers 53 job classifications, including nurses, occupational therapists, physical therapists, pharmacists and laboratory assistants.

Other workers at Sparrow are in United Auto Workers Local 4911. At the time of this writing, the website for Local 4911 had not reported the strike authorization by its members' 2,200 co-workers.

The vote came amid a major surge in coronavirus cases in the state. Michigan leads the United States in seven-day average daily new cases and hospitalizations, at 88 and 35 per 100,000, respectively. As of this writing, Sparrow Hospital in Lansing, the largest in the health care system, has 108 COVID-19 patients, with 25 in the ICU. Its bed occupancy rate is 98 percent.

A federal mediator arrived last week for the negotiations. MNA bargaining representatives are racing to find an agreement with Sparrow to avert the strike which has now been authorized. If no agreement is reached, there must be at least 10 days' warning before a strike begins.

On the Monday following the vote, management announced a new offer which does not address the

workers' demands. While the newest contract offer contains no cuts to health insurance, it maintains a strict attendance policy, under which a worker can be fired for missing only 24 hours of work in a year, and it excludes any guarantees for N95 respirators for providers or cost-of-living adjustments. The "offer" also continues the rejection of Sparrow's earlier commitment to safe staffing levels and proposes to give priority to agency nurses over PESCH nurses in some scenarios.

Provocatively, the newest proposal from Sparrow comes with a threat to health care workers: The offer will be revoked if Sparrow workers strike or fail to ratify by December 6.

Haley, a rehab professional with over five years at Sparrow and three decades' total experience in the profession, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the conditions pushing Sparrow workers into struggle.

Echoing comments of Kaiser workers in California, Haley explained how contract language on staffing is insufficient. "We have strong language in our contract, but it doesn't matter if it doesn't get enforced."

Staffing is so bad at Sparrow that Haley frequently needs to stop her own work in order to cover someone else, by answering a patient call or cleaning a dirty room, for example. Such tasks are necessary for patient care, but the time that they require is time which Haley should be spending to address her own patients' needs.

She stressed that the wage demands of workers were necessary in response to the rising cost of living. Last year, the union accepted a concessions-laced, one-year contract extension, which they justified by the pandemic crisis. The contract extension gave up raises and bonuses for frontline workers, a hardship which top

executives did not share.

Media reports have claimed that management's latest offer includes bonuses for nurses. However, Haley explained that these so-called "bonuses" require nurses to sign contracts agreeing to extra shifts.

In a similar, lying fashion, bargaining representatives from the hospital have stated that health care premiums for part-time caregivers will not increase in 2022. This short-term reprieve would be reportedly followed by year-after-year increases of over 25 percent in health care premiums in both 2023 and 2024.

Haley raised fears that the terrible conditions at the hospital are causing a dangerous decline in quality of care. "We're losing bedside caregivers at an alarming rate. We just don't have anything left in the tank. Working in COVID units is stressful, and when you're not going to have safe staff, everybody hurts.

"We do not want to leave patients in an unsafe situation. PESCH is unique because we have so many different job classifications. It's going to be hard to cover all of those. But agency wages are getting crazy. Everybody has seen the texts that go out offering \$150/hour to work with these staffing agencies. If that money exists, then [Sparrow] can pay us more."

Sparrow employees must take warning from the experience of Kaiser Permanente workers in California who are fighting betrayals by the unions, which canceled a strike of 32,000 workers and announced a new tentative agreement with new concessions. A statement by the newly formed Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee, formed to mobilize opposition to the unions' sellout, says, "We now know that we confront not only attacks by management but the unions which claim to represent us. The UNAC/UHCP (United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Health Care Professionals) called off our strike at the last minute and announced a tentative agreement which it claimed was a 'major victory.'"

Sparrow workers should draw the important lessons and reach out to the WSWs for assistance in forming their own independent rank-and-file committee.



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