

Workers at Trinity-Mercy Hospital in Muskegon, Michigan demand new contract by January 31

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Hospital workers at Trinity Health-Mercy in Muskegon, Michigan are demanding wage increases, improved working conditions and a retention bonus in a new contract to be negotiated by January 31. The workers have not had an agreement with the hospital chain since 2019.

Like health care employees across the country, the Trinity Health-Mercy hospital workforce faces short-staffing and overwork driven by the coronavirus pandemic. Some of the nurses, respiratory therapists, cleaners and dietary technicians at the hospital have not had a wage increase since 2017.

Workers at the Muskegon hospital report that they are paid 15 to 20 percent less than prevailing wages at other hospitals in Western Michigan.

Trinity Health is a nominally not-for-profit Catholic health care corporation based in Livonia, Michigan and operating in 22 states. The organization has 92 hospitals and 120 acute-care hospitals, outpatient facilities, long-term care facilities, and numerous home health offices and hospice programs. In 2021, Trinity Health had assets of \$33.6 billion and an operating revenue of \$20.2 billion.

Like most health care systems, Trinity Health is the product of mergers and acquisitions over the past 22 years. It began as a merger between Holy Cross Health System in South Bend, Indiana and Mercy Health Services in Farmington Hills, Michigan in 2000.

According to 2019 filings, the former CEO of Trinity Health, Richard Gilfillan, was paid \$2,951,758 and the top 27 highest compensated executives earned a collective \$35 million. There are 17 executives making more than \$1 million per year.

A hospital employee who returned to work at Mercy

during the pandemic told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “The schedules I get are awful. I’m told ‘well, you’re low seniority, so there’s nothing I can do.’ The hospitals [in Muskegon] merged just before the pandemic hit and there’s still quite a divide. It’s hard to watch. Mercy/Trinity health did nothing to help with the transition. New staff are just expected to know how to care for COVID patients and I really didn’t know what to assess outside of what I normally do or how to use some of the equipment. It felt like being thrown to the wolves in a way.”

Another worker posted a comment on Facebook and called for community support for the hospital workers, “We are hemorrhaging nurses and support staff every day and have been for months now! Why? It’s not because we don’t feel loyal to our community, it’s because we can’t take it anymore! Other hospitals in west Michigan are paying their nurses SIGNIFICANTLY more to retain their staff. Travel nurses can earn their yearly salary for a 13-week stint! All while Mercy does nothing! We are fighting for competitive wages to stop the bleed of nurses for YOU, our community, to be able to provide you with the care you deserve!”

The hospital responded to the demand for a settlement by January 31 by issuing a statement to the press that made the bogus claim that the workers were to blame for the lack of a contract because insulting bonus offers have been repeatedly rejected by the workers.

A hospital employee, commenting on the bonus offer on Facebook, wrote, “So many problems regarding that ‘bonus.’ ... Problem—that bonus was only going to be given to nurses who work 40+ hours a week.

Problem—90+% of the nurses who work in this building are scheduled 3–12-hour shifts or less. Problem—they wanted to give the ‘bonus’ in 3 increments. Problem—the offered bonus was \$2000 less than what was given to the nurses of Spectrum Health where the nurses also received a raise!! Problem—we can’t keep nurses because they choose not to pay an appropriate wage!! Does this make us all absolutely sick to our stomach? Hell yes, it does!! And yet I still love my community and the people I work beside. I choose to stay because this is what I know. But honestly EVERY.SINGLE.DAY I feel taken advantage of.”

Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Healthcare Michigan represents 1,700 workers at Trinity Health-Mercy. At a rally organized by the union on January 17, that included the participation of nurses, support staff, hospital workers and community supporters, the union did not state that a strike would be called if a new contract was not reached by January 31. Instead, the union issued a statement that said that the workers “are prepared to authorize their bargaining committee to do what is necessary to win a fair contract.”

The union also invited Terry Sabo, Democratic Party state representative for the 92nd District in Michigan, as a keynote speaker at the rally. Sabo said he was in discussions with the management of Trinity Health and “they have assured me” that they want “better working conditions, adequate staffing and fair wages” for the health care employees, to which the crowd responded with an outburst of laughter.

The hospital workers at Trinity Health-Mercy must be warned that should a strike be called on February 1, the SEIU will not do anything to mobilize its membership or appeal to other sections of the working class to take similar action in support of the struggle. SEIU Healthcare Michigan claims that it represents more than 17,000 health care and more than 6,000 nursing home workers in the state of Michigan.

With the Omicron variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus raging across the state—the seven-day average number of cases is now at more than 17,000, which is more than double that of the previous surges of the coronavirus—health care workers in Michigan are all facing the exact same fight as the Trinity Health-Mercy hospital employees.

However, the SEIU and the rest of the official labor

movement are going to do everything possible to isolate the Trinity Health-Mercy workers and defeat their fight for improved staffing, wages and working conditions. The unions and the Democratic Party are spreading the lie that health care workers—who are being squeezed to the limits by the corporations to generate maximum profits and provide for multimillion-dollar executive salaries—do not need to go on strike or wage a mass struggle against the employers to achieve their demands.

The answer to the problems confronting health care workers can only be found through the organization of rank-and-file committees that are independent of the unions and the Democrats and will take the fight against the employers to all sections of the working class in every industry.



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