

# Union diverts nurses' struggle against Trinity Health Muskegon into useless petition drive

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Nurses and support staff at Trinity Health Muskegon are in a struggle against low pay, short-staffing and excessive overtime, after being without a contract since 2019. The 1,700 workers at the hospital belong to Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Healthcare Michigan.

The union held a rally on January 17 to publicize the lack of a contract, setting a deadline of January 31 for Trinity Health Muskegon to reach an agreement with the union. When the deadline passed with no agreement, the union held a vote February 4-7 to authorize informational picketing. The union issued a statement saying workers “are prepared to authorize their bargaining committee to do what is necessary to win a fair contract.”

But since the beginning of February, there have been no contract bargaining updates posted on the SEIU website. The union Facebook page had nothing to say about the contract struggle until the end of March. At that time, the union unveiled a petitioning campaign to beg Trinity for better working conditions and higher pay. They are asking state legislators to give statements of support and asking members of the community and healthcare workers to sign the petition.

An Emergency Department technician, Marissa Aney, described on the SEIU Facebook page the situation facing workers: “We have a great team, but we are constantly working short-staffed and being asked to do more including cleaning rooms and lab work. We provide so much to our medical team—EKGs, splints, braces, helping doctors set up chest tubes and central lines, CPR, and more. Despite the value we provide, Trinity Health wants ED techs to take a pay cut. That’s not right. Trinity needs to make a competitive offer that respects how much we put into our work each and every day.”

The union petition reads: “I’m standing with Mercy Hospital workers for a fair contract. Mercy Hospital workers are calling on Trinity to recognize and respect their sacrifices by offering a fair contract. Our healthcare workers are fighting for fair wages, adequate staffing, and better working conditions to ensure they can provide the quality care our patients deserve. Now they need their community to stand with them in solidarity and support their contract fight.”

Trinity Health is classified as a nonprofit hospital chain, although it controls vast financial resources, with operating revenue of more than \$20 billion, as a result of multiple mergers among Catholic hospital chains, including the western Michigan-based Mercy Health Care, which operated the Muskegon facility.

Nonprofit status means Trinity pays no local, state or federal income taxes. Nonprofits hospitals originally held this status because they were funded through charitable contributions, with physicians volunteering to treat patients. Their purpose was to serve poor patients who could not pay for care.

Obviously, the situation is different now. An article in Planet Money’s newsletter by Yale School of Public Health economist Zack Cooper detailed his research into what nonprofit hospitals do with their profits. He found: “They funnel much of the profits into cushy salaries, shiny equipment, new buildings, and, of course, lobbying. In 2018, hospitals and nursing homes spent over \$100 million on lobbying activities. And they spent about \$30 million on campaign contributions....It’s suggestive to me that this was in a sense a quid pro quo.”

Cooper described health care spending as a “piggy bank” for political influence. Trinity Health is a member of the Michigan Health and Hospital Association, which spent \$374,800 for candidates

during the 2020 election to look out for hospitals' interests.

The Medical Economics website noted, "Those would-be tax dollars go into seven-figure executive salaries, boondoggle retreats, extravagant galas, private jets, billboard ads, skyboxes, offshore bank accounts, and to fund special interest lobbyists."

The *New York Times* reported that from 2005 to 2015, average chief executive compensation in nonprofit hospitals increased by 93 percent. Nurses saw an increase of only 3 percent. Nurses and other hospital staff are being worn to the bone to make hospital executives millionaires. Trinity's director, president and CEO, Michael Slubowski, took in \$2,866,730 last year, while Robert Casalou, the Michigan Region's president and CEO, made \$1,579,544.

These huge capitalist institutions serve the elite and their political representatives, the Democratic and Republican parties. Trinity Health reported their nationwide system had an excess of revenue over expenses for fiscal year 2021 that totaled \$3.9 billion, with their investment portfolio performing very well, in addition to cost-cutting measures.

The SEIU Healthcare Michigan has its own stake in not rocking the boat. Public records show that in 2020, President Andrea Acevedo's total compensation was \$138,026; Executive VP Kenneth Haney's was \$103,415; and Executive VP Scott Holiday's was \$101,877 (Office of Labor Management Standards, April 8, 2021). These incomes are more than twice the average nurse's pay at Trinity Health Muskegon.

The union is telling nurses and support staff that their petitions can convince Trinity management to give up some of the lucrative revenues that go up the more Trinity exploits employees. The SEIU is organizing petitions and getting glib statements from politicians so it looks like they're doing something. What they're actually doing, as they've done in other hospital workers struggles, is divide health care workers and help Trinity and other hospital bosses impose more brutal conditions on nurses and support staff.

For example, at Beaumont Health, where the SEIU represents about 1,000 support employees, the union organized rallies, including a demonstration at Beaumont CEO John Fox's house. In February 2020, the union signed a deal which it described as a "victory," for a 5 percent raise over three years,

including 1.5 percent in each of the first two years and a 2 percent raise in year three.

At least 207,000 healthcare workers nationally are covered by the more than 400 labor agreements set to expire this year, according to data compiled by Bloomberg Law. Hospital management want to make sure that the short staffing, overwork, long hours, low pay and more does not boil over into a mass struggle by health care workers. The SEIU tries to prevent any struggle from taking place and if one breaks out, sabotages it.

Nurses and support staff need to organize a rank-and-file committee to take the struggle against Trinity Health into their own hands. Negotiations must be open to all members to see what is going on. Currently, whatever discussions are taking place go on behind their backs.

A rank-and-file committee can link the struggle of health care workers at Trinity to those of 5,000 nurses at the University of Michigan Health System, whose contract expires June 30. University of Michigan Health-West has formed a cardiac care joint venture for heart surgery with Mercy Health and Michigan Medicine, and plans have been going forward this year.

But there are different unions at U-M and Trinity, the Michigan Nurses Association and the SEIU, and they keep the workers separate even when the bosses are getting together to better combine their vast financial resources and operations.



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