

Nurses need a winning strategy for contract fight at Michigan Medicine

Kevin Reed
14 June 2022

With the June 30 contract deadline for more than 5,000 nurses at Michigan Medicine just two weeks away, rank-and-file nurses must begin immediately to mobilize their enormous strength to prevent hospital management and the Michigan Nurses Association-University of Michigan Professional Nurse Council (MNA-UMPNC) from ramming through a new four-year concessionary agreement.

Bargaining updates from both management and the union show that none of the most important issues facing nurses are being addressed in the contract negotiations. Far from it!

Management is continuing to demand insulting pay increases that are less than half the current rate of inflation, more staff reductions, ongoing mandatory overtime and excessive on-call hours, as well as the adoption of “unit incentives” that will divide and pit nurses against one another.

Michigan Medicine’s June 10 bargaining report shows that part of management’s strategy is to force through a rotten contract and then use Joint Implementation Teams to “problem solve issues related to implementation and administration of the contract throughout the duration of the agreement.”

The June 13 union update admits, “Work redesign and unit reconfiguration can make already stressful working conditions worse.”

But the union has allowed these changes for years. Now it wants only to be more involved in the process. The real purpose of these labor-management teams is to single out anyone who speaks out and suppress opposition from the rank and file.

“Work Connections,” a university program related to injuries and disabilities, gave a report to the bargaining meeting and proposed an initiative that doesn’t address the conditions at the hospital that cause these problems.

The local MNA-UMPNC has been organizing events that are useless in beating back a new round of concessions. Instead of basing itself on the strength of the working class at the University and throughout Michigan, the union has been holding “ally” events to get local business owners in downtown Ann Arbor to put signs in their windows saying they are “united with nurses.”

Now the MNA-UMPNC is organizing a protest before the University of Michigan Regents meeting on June 16 to present a petition calling on board members to help “negotiate a fair contract.” A similar presentation at the May 19 Regents’ meeting fell on deaf ears, with the Board of Regents taking no action and commenting that it was “not involved directly in the negotiations.”

The MNA-UMPNC opposes any mass action by nurses to restore past gains and win new ones from the hospital. The state MNA has not published a single article on its website about the contract fight or campaigned on social media to win support for the nurses at Michigan Medicine. Instead, the union is seeking to isolate the Michigan Medicine nurses and convince them that nothing can be done to stop management from imposing further onerous conditions at the hospital.

This is a lie. Nurses can and must unite with the thousands of support staff at Michigan Medicine, not to mention wider layers of health care workers in the state, who are all facing the same struggle against the multibillion-dollar health care industry.

The MNA-UMPNC has failed to even issue demands on critical issues such as wages, staffing levels and working conditions. This is not because Michigan Medicine “has no money” to provide for its employees. It is the fifth largest health care system in the state of

Michigan, with annual revenues of \$5 billion and profits of more than \$300 million.

Nurses are in a powerful position to go on the offensive and win a contract that is in their interests and not those of management.

The *World Socialist Web Site* Health Care Workers Newsletter suggests a strategy that centers on the following demands:

- Demand an immediate strike vote. Nurses must insist on a vote of the rank and file to authorize strike action and put the management of Michigan Medicine on notice that they will walk off the job on June 30 if their demands are not met. Reach out to win the support of the rest of the hospital staff, university employees, students, patients and the working class in Ann Arbor, across Michigan and beyond.
- A pay increase of 10 percent per year.
- Cost-of-Living Adjustments (COLA) calibrated on a monthly basis so that wages keep pace with rising inflation, currently at 8.6 percent annually.
- Safe nurse-to-patient ratios. Hire more nurses and support staff. The hospital must improve conditions so nurses can ensure their own health and safety and that of their patients.
- Halt mandatory overtime and extended on-call hours. Nurses are tired of being called heroes while being treated like garbage. They deserve a quality of life that is free from 16-hour shifts and being on-call all hours of the day and night.
- Upgrade protections against COVID-19. New and more dangerous variants are rising. Nurses need enough PPE, facility upgrades and procedures put in place to ensure their health and safety while on the job and protect the health of their patients.
- Demand that bargaining meetings be live-streamed so nurses can see what is being said behind closed doors.

To achieve these demands, nurses need to establish a rank-and-file committee of nurses and other health care workers. This committee must be democratic and independent of the official union, which is tied to management and the big business Democratic Party.

It will provide information and coordination to conduct a serious fight for safe staffing, wage increases, mental health services, a massive infusion of funds into the health care system and an end to the subordination of health care to private profit. It will link up with

health care worker rank-and-file committees being organized across the country, which are defending nurses scapegoated for unsafe conditions such as RaDonna Vaught and Michelle Heughins.

The Michigan Medicine nurses' struggle is part of a growing nationwide and international movement of health care workers against decades of intensified exploitation and abuse.

There is a growing movement of protest and strike action by hospital employees in Germany, France, the UK, Turkey and India, as well as strikes by nurses at St. Michael's Medical Center in New Jersey, resident physicians in Los Angeles and nurses at Orlando Regional Medical Center in Florida.

Rather than uniting nurses with health care workers in other states and countries, the unions seek to keep the working class tied to the Democratic Party, which supports the capitalist profit system. Capitalism sees health care as a commodity to be bought and sold for profit. Nurses are in a political struggle to make health care a social right based on the needs of the population and not the enrichment of a few.

To discuss these issues and organize the struggle needed to win, send an email to sep.ann.arbor@gmail.com or call us at 260-833-7383.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact