

Build a rank-and-file committee to stop the sellout

# Nurses must mobilize their strength to win the contract fight at Michigan Medicine

WSWS Health Care Workers Newsletter  
28 June 2022

*Are you a nurse or health care worker at Michigan Medicine? We want to hear from you! Contact the WSWS Health Care Worker Newsletter using the form at the end of this article to share your experience and discuss the next steps forward.*

With less than two days to go before their contract expires, 6,200 nurses at Michigan Medicine, the health care system of the University of Michigan, are facing a struggle against hospital management's plan to impose a four-year concessionary agreement, including pay increases that do not keep pace with inflation and the maintenance of mandatory overtime and an oppressive on-call system.

At the same time, nurses confront the opposition of the union—the Michigan Nurses Association (MNA) and the University of Michigan Professional Nurse Council (UMPNC)—to the mobilization of the membership along with the rest of the hospital staff to win a contract that is in their interests. Throughout the contract fight, the union has isolated the Michigan Medicine nurses and refused to unite them with other health care workers in Michigan who are facing the same struggle.

The only way that Michigan Medicine nurses can stop the imposition of a new sellout agreement is to demand an immediate strike vote and the adoption of a list of contract demands based on what nurses and their patients need, not what management says is or is not affordable. The contract fight must be taken out of the hands of the pro-corporate union and a rank-and-file committee established that directs the struggle as part of the growing movement of workers in every industry against concessions and attacks on basic rights.

According to a report published by the MNA on June 16, management is refusing to address the nurse staffing crisis that has made working conditions intolerable at Michigan Medicine. Instead, the hospital administration is proposing a contract that will “make it easier to force nurses to work overtime, and they won’t even talk about safe RN-to-patient

workload ratios to ensure every patient can get quality care.”

In a bargaining update on June 23, the UMPNC wrote that management “is insisting on continuing mandatory overtime while also proposing an on-call system that is less fair to members than that proposed by MNA-UMPNC.” Nevertheless, the UMPNC made it clear that it would accept the continuation of forced overtime and oppressive on-call hours in exchange for “enhanced incentives.”

The union admits that dozens of bargaining sessions since March and a march and protest at the University of Michigan Board of Regents meeting on June 17 have produced no progress on the key issues facing Michigan Medicine nurses.

This is because the fight against Michigan Medicine is a fight against the financialization of the health care industry, which is behind the intensified exploitation of nurses, doctors and support staff that is taking place in hospitals across the country. While billions are being extracted for the enrichment of the financial elite and executive management of both for-profit and “not-for-profit” health care systems, the income and working conditions of hospital employees and the quality of care for patients are continually being eroded.

Michigan Medicine has enormous financial resources, but these are being used to pay massive salaries for its executive leadership and to make real estate investments. In 2021, for example, Michigan Medicine had an operating profit of \$339.8 million and the top 25 executives at the health care system took home a combined \$16.7 million.

The University of Michigan, holder of the assets of the health care system, has an endowment fund of \$17 billion, which earned a \$4.7 billion return on investment, a 40.6 percent increase, in 2021. The same Board of Regents to which the union tells nurses they should appeal for support voted in the middle of the contract talks, on May 19, to approve a \$15 million renovation of the 14,000-square-foot home of University of Michigan President Mary Sue

Coleman, who is paid \$852,346 annually.

Michigan Medicine nurses are in a powerful position to go on the offensive and win a contract that meets their needs.

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 sufficient 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 RaDonda 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 and places the financial interests of the medical industry above public health interests. The Biden administration and the Democrats are allowing federal funding for testing, treatment and vaccinations for COVID-19 to be shut down, and they are doing nothing to stop the destruction of the right to abortion.

While there are needs throughout the US for financial resources to be spent on providing services and hiring staff for the health and well-being of millions of people, the Democrats and Republicans are instead allocating hundreds of billions to fight a war against Russia in Ukraine. In the state of Michigan, Democratic Party Governor Gretchen Whitmer has remained completely silent about the appalling conditions facing nurses and health care workers across the state, including at Michigan Medicine.

Under capitalism, health care is 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, and this means fighting for workers' control of the industry and for socialism.

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



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