

As management digs in on concessions prior to July 16 informational picketing

Michigan Medicine nurses must demand a strike vote now!

WSWS Health Care Workers Newsletter
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Are you a nurse or health care worker at Michigan Medicine? Contact the WSWS Health Care Workers Newsletter using the form at the end of this article to discuss building a rank-and-file committee.

The unions are keeping 6,200 nurses at the University of Michigan health care system on the job nearly two weeks after their contract expired. The nurses are being held back from a real fight for safe staffing and good wages and benefits.

The fact that the Michigan Nurses Association (MNA) and its affiliated University of Michigan Professional Nurse Council (UMPNC) is keeping nurses on the job only ties the nurses' hands and favors management, which feels emboldened. In its latest update on July 8, the hospital administration has ramped up its provocations against the nurses. Michigan Medicine is offering only 5 percent wage increases a year for four years, plus a \$5,000 signing bonus. Given the fact that inflation is at 9.1 percent, this amounts to a substantial pay cut for nurses.

Meanwhile, management openly declares it will not resolve the nurses' number one issue, staffing ratios. Management's offer says that mandatory overtime will only be eliminated "within the next 24 months or sooner." Even assuming this is true, and there is no reason to believe that it is, what will the health care system even look like after two years of continuous overtime? How many nurses will even be left to resume normal working hours?

Moreover, management is openly subverting negotiations by going around the union and emailing a copy of its June 30 contract proposal directly to nurses.

The email contains an implicit financial threat if nurses do not immediately surrender: "we felt it was important for all nurses to be aware of the offer we made to MNA/UMPNC because nurses will be impacted by a pause in salary increases until a new agreement is ratified." The union also reported that management is denying any input from the union on contract incentives and demanding that these be applied by management "at their sole discretion."

Under these conditions, there is nothing to talk about with the hospital administration! The *World Socialist Web Site Health Care Workers Newsletter* urges nurses to demand the immediate calling of a strike vote, and that the unions set a deadline for a contract that meets the nurses' demands. We suggest that nurses take up the following demands:

- A pay increase of 10 percent per year, plus cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) calibrated on a monthly basis so that wages keep pace with rising inflation, currently at 9.1 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.

To achieve these demands, nurses need to establish a rank-and-file committee uniting nurses and other health care workers. This committee will provide the means for nurses themselves to assert democratic rank-and-file control over the process, against the bureaucratic smothering of their fight by the MNA bureaucracy. Nurses should demand that bargaining meetings be live-streamed so nurses can see what is being said behind closed doors. They should also 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.

The union will no doubt counter that nurses are public employees and therefore legally barred from striking. But they are only using this anti-worker law as a convenient excuse not to call a strike vote. In 2018, 4,000 members of the UMPNC voted by 94 percent to authorize a strike against Michigan Medicine.

But even if we take their claims as true, by the letter of the law nurses are allowed to strike over unfair labor practices (ULP). There is no question that management is not bargaining in good faith. But in reality, neither is the union. These talks are not “negotiations” between adversarial parties, but strategy sessions aimed at putting together a concessions contract, with the task of the union being to force it by the membership.

To provide itself with cover, the union is calling an informational picket on July 16. Its announcement says that “allies from around the state will be coming to show support for the nurses.” While the speakers and “allies from around the state” are not identified by the union, it is all but certain that among them will be Democratic Party officials.

But the Democrats are jointly enforcing cuts to public health. The Biden administration has ended whatever COVID restrictions remained when he took office and is now redirecting tens of billions of dollars instead towards a reckless military confrontation against Russia.

Michigan nurses are not simply engaged in a contract fight. At issue is the principle that public health must take absolute priority over private profit. As the administration and union officials talk behind closed doors, a new surge of coronavirus is spreading around the country. The extent cannot be known precisely

because of the dismantling of reporting mechanisms, carried out by both parties so that they could claim the pandemic was “over.” But pandemic is not over, and new, more dangerous variants are continually emerging.

The health care system is already on the verge of collapse after two-and-a-half years of the pandemic. This only makes more urgent the fight for safe staffing ratios and other essential public health measures. This is exactly why health care workers have been striking all over the country and around the world, including hospital workers in Germany France, the UK, Turkey and India. In the US, there are the recent 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.

But in each case, nurses are confronting obstacles in the union bureaucracy, which has betrayed and isolated their fights in order to maintain their corrupt ties with management and the political establishment. In the United States alone, such betrayals have taken place at Providence St. Vincent in Oregon, Mercy Hospital in Buffalo and Kaiser Permanente, Cedars-Sinai and Stanford Health in California. In each case, the unions pushed through substandard contracts with cuts to real wages and no staffing guarantees.

This is why growing numbers of nurses are recognizing the need for independent organization. Around the country, nurses are forming rank-and-file committees. In May, nurses met to establish a national Rank-and-File Steering Committee. A committee at Michigan Medicine could affiliate to the national Steering Committee, and through this, collaborate with nurses around the country to build the broadest possible unity.

A real fight requires the independent action of nurses themselves. The *World Socialist Web Site* will assist nurses any way it can. For more information, fill out the form below:



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