Nurses' picket protests working conditions at Michigan Medicine

James McDonald, James Brookfield
18 July 2022

On Saturday, more than 1,000 nurses, supporters and family members participated in a rally and "informational picket" at Michigan Medicine's health care facilities in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The event commenced at a field nearby the hospital system and included a march through the medical campus, drawing attention to the expired contract that ended on June 30 and the ongoing intolerable working conditions for nurses.

As with all such events, the sentiments of the majority of those who attended the rally, which were mainly rank-and-file nurses, were at sharp odds with those of the event's organizers. The protest was called by the University of Michigan Professional Nurses Council (UMPNC), which nominally represents the 6,200 Michigan Medicine nurses, and its parent-affiliate, the Michigan Nurses Association (MNA).

The disparity between the position of the union and the nurses found expression in the very divergent views voiced at the event. Numerous nurses told reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* about the appalling and overwhelming conditions that they face. One nurse, who asked to withhold her name, said that it was a misnomer to speak of "burnout" in that the process began years ago, was accelerated by COVID-19 and seems to have a finished character to it now.

She spoke passionately about the tension felt every day between her desire to provide adequate care to all her patients and her own physical and emotional ability to do so. She referred to the epidemic of mental health issues faced by nurses and said that resources to address this were nowhere near meeting the need.

She agreed readily with the idea to broaden the struggle of the nurses to other sections of the working class rather than plead with the University of Michigan regents, even if she did hold out the hope that the latter would at some point recognize that the hospital could be more profitable if the nurses' conditions were improved. When asked whether health care needed to generate profits at all—shouldn't its purpose simply be to provide needed care? —she paused and found herself in basic agreement with this point.

Another nurse, a veteran of more than a decade at the hospital, spoke of being forced to stay beyond her shift due to inadequate staffing. "I have a young child at home. If I stay, who is going to care for him?" she asked.

She drew attention not only to pay issues and COVID-19 protections for the nurses, but the level of care now being provided at the hospital. "This is the first time that I have seen so many patients in the emergency room, spilling out into the hallways," she said. Did she agree that hospital management and the regents could be persuaded to provide what nurses require, as the union maintains? "Yes," she argued, "if we show that we are serious."

What about an appeal to broader sections of workers, including those in auto, retail, other services? "It's true, this [poor pay and conditions] is a problem everywhere," she said, indicating the type of struggle that is required to take forward the struggle against the management of the health care system.

The rhetoric from the platform of the event, however, was of an entirely different character. The MNA sought to present the union as defending the interests of the workers and the idea that the Democratic Party, or sections of it, as being on the side of the workers.

This was chiefly demonstrated in the inclusion among the speakers at the rally of US Representative Debbie Dingell, Democrat from Michigan's 12th Congressional District, which includes Ann Arbor. Never one to miss a photo-op, Dingell extolled the virtues of nurses, pointed out the sacrifice nurses have made working through the COVID-19 pandemic, and affected sympathy for the hardships they face.

The Democratic congresswoman claimed that she would "fight" with the nurses of Michigan Medicine to improve the situation. However, like all speakers on the stage, she failed to indicate precisely what that fight would entail.

With a tremor in her voice, Dingell recounted the story of a nurse at an unnamed hospital—"not Michigan," she stressed—who recently committed suicide. The congresswoman's cynicism knows no bounds. What have Democrats, who control the Senate, the House of Representatives and the White House, done to help nurses or other health care workers? Where are the federally mandated staffing ratios? Where are the federal protections from mandatory overtime?

That Dingell was called in for the rally at Michigan Medicine suggests just how much pressure the MNA-UMPNC and the hospital are under to contain nurses' anger.

© World Socialist Web Site

The lackluster response from the crowd—itself a fraction of the total number of nurses at Michigan Medicine—gave an indication that the ability of the union bureaucracy to keep the nurses struggle in check is approaching a limit. While just a few lines gained applause, the crowd ignored much of what was said from the podium and spoke in small groups around the field.

The determination of nurses to demand a resolution to the staffing crisis has been building, going back to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, while the union has sought to contain any mass struggle from breaking out. The refusal of the union to even hold a strike vote in the present contract fight, even though the management of Michigan Medicine has made it clear in negotiations that it is intransigent in its drive to impose a new concessionary agreement, is part of the preparations for a sellout of the nurses.

Indicating the concern within the upper echelons of the labor bureaucracy that the Michigan Medicine nurses will rebel against the MNA-UMPNC, Michigan AFL-CIO President Ron Bieber was also brought in to address the protest, claiming, "we've got your back" and "you are going to win." This is a bald-faced lie.

Ron Bieber is the son of former UAW President Owen Bieber, who oversaw the conversion of the auto workers union into an instrument of the Big Three corporations in the 1980s and 1990s, the destruction of thousands of auto jobs and the imposition of massive concessions on wages, benefits and working conditions in the auto factories across the US.

The younger Bieber has spent his entire career as a functionary of the corrupt UAW bureaucracy, including the UAW's "Community Action Program" and various joint union-management structures at General Motors. Not only has Bieber never led or been involved in a single struggle by workers to win anything from the auto companies, he has specialized in give-backs to the employers and the treacherous union betrayals of recent decades.

While Bieber was on his way up in the Michigan AFL-CIO bureaucracy, the top leadership of the UAW was accepting bribes from the auto companies and embezzling union funds to go on vacation and buy luxury items for themselves and their family members. Michigan Medicine nurses can be certain that they will hear nothing from Ron Bieber about what is required to win their fight against the fifth largest hospital system in Michigan or about how they can unite with the many other health care workers' struggles that are now unfolding across the state.

Other speakers at the rally included Renee Curtis, president of the Michigan Nurses Association-University of Michigan Professional Nurse Council (MNA-UMPNC), and Democratic state representative Felicia Brabec. Like Dingell, these speakers emphasized that they would "fight" and "stand together" with nurses but did not call for strike action or even the preparations for one. The only real weapon that workers possess, the power to refuse to work, is being withheld from the nurses by the union, and instead, the Democrats are being put forward falsely as though they are going to do something to address the crisis at the hospital.

While pseudo-left political groups, such as the Democratic Socialists of America and Left Voice, were present at the event and welcomed by the MNA-UMPNC and AFL-CIO, reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* were received with hostility from the union bureaucracy. The purpose of the intervention of such groups is to prop up the union and its political alliance with the Democratic Party. Their role is to prevent nurses—as well all other sections of the working class—from developing an independent political struggle against the corporate structures of the health care industry, whether they are public, not-for-profit or private and for-profit hospitals.

Union operatives hounded the WSWS reporters at the rally, interrupting interviews with nurses, telling those nearby that the WSWS is "anti-union," and hurling the word "socialist" as a damning epithet. Such tactics, however, which are motivated largely by fear of the rank-and-file nurses and the growth of left-wing sentiment among them, drew nurses toward the WSWS representatives and sparked interest in the program advanced by the WSWS *Health Care Workers Newsletter*.

The union's fear is because the newsletter has been distributed to nurses and other staff at Michigan Medicine for the past two months and has gained a following. Unlike the organizations of the pseudo-left who support the Democratic Party and endorse the union's role in blocking any struggle of workers from breaking out, the WSWS exposes the MNA-UMPNC's calculated fecklessness and encourages nurses to put forth concrete demands on staffing, wages and hours; to demand a strike vote, and to form democratic rank-and-file committees to take the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site