

After the July 16 rally, demand a strike vote!

Michigan Medicine nurses must act now to stop a sellout and win their contract fight

WSWS Health Care Workers Newsletter
19 July 2022

The rally and informational picket last Saturday at the medical complex of Michigan Medicine in Ann Arbor demonstrated the determination of nurses to win their fight for a new contract against the fifth largest health care system in the state of Michigan.

Hundreds of nurses and their supporters came out to demand an end to mandatory overtime, extended on-call hours and staffing reductions that have been intensified throughout the coronavirus pandemic and have made working conditions at Michigan Medicine intolerable.

As one nurse told the press at Saturday's protest, "They [Michigan Medicine] laid off 788 very important support staff. Well, their jobs didn't go away—they just got given to the nurses."

The turnout on July 16 showed that the 6,200 nurses at Michigan Medicine are in a powerful position to go on the offensive. By mobilizing their strength in strike action, along with the other 35,000 employees at the \$5.5 billion hospital as well as health care workers across the state who are facing the same issues, nurses can win their demands.

However, a sharp warning must be made to nurses that a betrayal of their struggle is being prepared behind closed doors by the Michigan Nurses Association (MNA) and its local affiliate, the University of Michigan Professional Nurse Council (UMPNC).

For the MNA-UMPNC, the rally and informational picket was not the opportunity to prepare for mass struggle against Michigan Medicine. On the contrary, the union put Democratic Party politicians such as Representative Debbie Dingell of Ann Arbor and Michigan AFL-CIO bureaucrats such as Ron Bieber on the platform and told nurses to place their confidence in these figures to address their situation.

It is a fraud to claim that the Democratic Party and the

AFL-CIO—both central players in the assault on health care workers and the transformation of the US health care industry into a series of money-making enterprises for a handful of executives and financial elites—are going to fight for the interests of nurses.

For the union, the real purpose of the rally and informational picket was to set the stage for an announcement that a deal has been reached with Michigan Medicine management, while hiding the reality of a concessionary agreement dictated by the University of Michigan Board of Regents.

The union bureaucracy will then seek to ram the contract through without giving nurses sufficient time to study and discuss an agreement that will impact them and their families for years to come.

Three weeks have now passed since the previous contract between the hospital and the nurses expired on June 30. The union allowed the contract to expire and did nothing. It did not even demand the extension of the old contract, giving management the opportunity to forego scheduled pay increases.

Throughout the contract negotiations that began in late March, the MNA-UMPNC has not even put forward any specific demands on wages, benefits or working conditions for nurses.

While the union has been meeting with management five days a week for the past two months, the talks have not been between two adversaries. The discussions have been about the best means to impose even harsher conditions and a cut in real wages on the nurses, in line with the university's strategy to increase profits at the expense of hospital staff and patients. The union's sole concern is to secure the salaries and positions of the union executives.

The interests of rank-and-file nurses are not represented

in these closed-door meetings, whose results are never seriously reported to the nurses.

On July 13, for example, the union issued a pro-forma bargaining update that said, “Negotiations are ongoing, and we are advocating for our members at the table every day.”

Meanwhile, the MNA-UMPNC admits that management is demanding “101 concessions” in its contract offer.

Nurses have the right to know precisely what the union bargaining team is discussing with a management that has made it clear it will accept nothing but a new concessionary agreement.

As the *World Socialist Web Site Health Care Workers Newsletter* has pointed out throughout the contract fight, Michigan Medicine nurses are facing a struggle against both the management of the health care system and its agents in the MNA-UMPNC leadership.

Michigan Medicine has worked out a long-term business strategy—including the construction of a new \$1 billion hospital called The Pavilion in Ann Arbor—that will intensify the exploitation of nurses. The union accepts and collaborates in the implementation of these plans while leaving nurses in the dark about what is really going on.

To prevent the sellout of their struggle, nurses must seize the initiative now and turn the situation around by demanding an immediate strike vote and date for a walkout.

Along with these actions, the nurses should formulate their own list of demands to be included in the new contract. They should proceed from the principle that the contract must be determined by the needs of the nurses and the safety of their patients, not what management says it can afford.

The *World Socialist Web Site Health Care Workers Newsletter* suggests 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 that will unite them with doctors and support staff at Michigan Medicine as well as other health care workers in the state. This committee, which will be made up of rank-and-file employees at the hospital, will provide the means for nurses themselves to assert democratic control over the process, against the bureaucratic manipulation of their struggle by the MNA-UMPNC apparatus.

Nurses should demand that bargaining meetings be live-streamed so they can see what is being discussed behind closed doors.

All these measures must be conducted independently of and against the Democratic Party, one of the two parties of big business and the health care and insurance industry. One of the reasons the Democrats and the Michigan AFL-CIO are so concerned about the situation at Michigan Medicine is they fear the struggle will break free of their domination and link up with ongoing struggles of autoworkers, teachers and other workers.

Another reason is the Democratic Party primary elections that will be held in Michigan on August 2 and the general election in November, in which Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer is running for a new term. The MNA-UMPNC, along with the AFL-CIO, want to have the Michigan Medicine nurses’ contract resolved in advance of these events.

The building of rank-and-file committees of nurses and health care workers will advance the fight to unite all workers on the basis of a program that meets the needs of working people—including guaranteed, high-quality health care for all, free of charge, achieved by taking the profit out of health care.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact