

The Michigan Medicine nurses contract fight and the right to strike

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On July 26, in response to the call by the World Socialist Web Site for nurses at Michigan Medicine to go on strike to win their demands, a reader with the username of “Union Nurse” submitted the following comment:

“Apparently WSWS is ignorant to Michigan Labor Laws that prohibit public sector employees from striking. Not surprising really given their clear anti-union stance.”

Below is our reply.

The right of nurses at Michigan Medicine to strike is an important issue and has been addressed in several recent WSWS articles, including our report on the June 30 expiration of the contract and our report prior to the July 16 rally and informational picket organized by the union, the Michigan Nurses Association and its local affiliate, the University of Michigan Professional Nurse Council (MNA-UMPNC).

Both the Hutchinson Act of 1947 and the Public Employment Relations Act of 1965 declared strikes by public employees in Michigan illegal. However, these laws have never stopped public employees from striking. According to one study, as of November 25, 1988, there had been 820 public-sector strikes in Michigan over the previous 23 years, 80 percent of which were by university educators and public school teachers.

Even under these laws, as the MNA-UMPNC has pointed out, the nurses can strike legally if their action is deemed to be a response to unfair labor practices by Michigan Medicine. While there is no question that Michigan Medicine is engaged in unfair labor practices—for example, the union has reported that more than 800 Assignment Despite Objection (ADO) complaints filed by nurses remain unresolved—the MNA-UMPNC has refused to even take a strike vote.

The right to strike—the most powerful weapon Michigan Medicine nurses have to win their demand for an end to the staffing shortage and intolerable working conditions—raises fundamental political questions. If nurses went on strike and the state sought to enforce the laws on the books, who would be responsible for imposing the anti-strike legislation? It would be the Democratic Party administration of Governor Gretchen Whitmer, that is, the very same politicians that the MNA-UMPNC is supporting in the upcoming November elections.

In 1981 and 1989, nurses at the University of Michigan medical facilities ignored the no-strike laws and walked out to fight for their demands. In July 1989, more than 1,700 registered nurses at University of Michigan Hospital went on strike for 13 days before a circuit court injunction was imposed to end the walkout. Significantly, the 1989 strike was over the same issues facing nurses today: understaffing, shift assignment and rotation, weekend scheduling and mandatory overtime. At that time, the governor of Michigan, who oversaw the strikebreaking, was Democrat James Blanchard.

In 2018, University of Michigan Health System nurses voted overwhelmingly for strike action, although the MNA-UMPNC never called a walkout. In both 1989 and 2018, the unions blocked nurses from uniting in a common struggle with other hospital employees and broader sections of the working class. In the end, new concessions contracts were agreed to, and these betrayals contributed to the intolerable conditions that prevail at the hospital today.

The argument that nurses do not have a right to strike is being pushed by the MNA-UMPNC to prevent any mass action and direct confrontation by the nurses with Michigan Medicine management, the University of

Michigan Board of Regents and the state government in Lansing. Preventing a strike is part of the strategy of the MNA-UMPNC to maintain its cozy relationship with the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. The union bureaucracy in Michigan is now doing everything possible to prevent a confrontation from breaking out before the November 8 general election.

Finally, the position of the WSWs on the contract fight of Michigan Medicine nurses—as well as every struggle by unionized workers—is not “anti-union.” We are not against unions. We are opposed to the pro-corporate organizations, unions in name only, which the union bureaucracies control.

These official labor organizations have been transformed into an apparatus of unaccountable bureaucrats who serve as industrial police for the corporate elite to suppress the struggles of workers. In return, they receive a share of the profits from the exploitation of the workers. They do not represent the interests of the membership.

The union bureaucrats collect dues from workers’ paychecks and use the money to fund their bloated salaries and make financial contributions to their friends in the Democratic Party. Meanwhile, the past gains made by workers in wages, benefits and working conditions that took decades of struggle to win have been bargained away by the unions in one concessionary agreement after another.

It is imperative that nurses take matters into their own hands, call for a strike vote, draw up a list of demands and set a deadline for a walkout if these demands are not met. Such an action by 6,200 nurses will galvanize the rest of the hospital staff—support workers, doctors and others—behind them along with the students, faculty and staff at the University of Michigan.

As we have insisted throughout the Michigan Medicine contract struggle, the way forward requires the formation of a nurses’ rank-and-file committee that is democratically elected and connected with the growing movement of workers in every industry to go on the offensive and reverse the concessionary trend of the past four decades.

Such committees are being established among health care workers, auto workers, educators, retail and logistics workers in Michigan, across the country and internationally.

WSWS Health Care Workers Newsletter will do all in our power to assist Michigan Medicine nurses in forming a rank-and-file committee. Michigan Medicine nurses and health care workers can contact us here.

As the role of the Democratic Party in enforcing anti-democratic laws stripping Michigan Medicine and public-sector workers of the right to strike shows, the development of a network of rank-and-file committees must be accompanied by a new political strategy—a break with both parties of big business and the building an independent political movement of the working class.

We urge nurses and supporters to follow the campaign of Will Lehman, a socialist who is running for president of the UAW. Will Lehman is not seeking to reform the leadership of the UAW but to organize a movement of the rank-and-file that will abolish the pro-corporate union bureaucracy and mobilize workers to fight for improved wages, benefits and working conditions in the factories. This campaign shows that the way forward for workers in every industry and every union is the building of a new leadership in the working class that is opposed to the entire capitalist system, the source of all attacks on workers, and for socialism.



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