Frustration builds among nurses as union leaves them in the dark in contract talks at Michigan Medicine

George Kirby
8 August 2022

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. What are the main issues you face at your workplace? What do you think needs to be done?All submissions will be kept anonymous.

After four months of contract talks, the University of Michigan Professional Nurse Council (MNA-UMPNC) is continuing to keep Michigan Medicine nurses in the dark about the progress of talks. The union has kept nurses on the job for five weeks since the expiration of their previous deal July 1, a clear signal that the union is collaborating with management to work out a sellout deal.

The MNA-UMPNC itself has accused management of engaging in unfair labor practices, yet has refused to call a strike or any job action outside of periodic demonstrations outside of the main campus in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Growing numbers of nurses and broad hospital workers are becoming frustrated with the endless delays from the union bureaucracy.

In the latest bargaining update on August 5, the MPNC said only, "Your bargaining team asked management at the table whether they would consider any time limitation on continuation of care to be reasonable: hours, days, etc. They said they would have to get back with us." Such an insulting "update" can only try nurses' patience. If talks are proceeding at such a glacial pace more than five weeks after the previous deal expired, this can only mean that they are being deliberately dragged out as long as possible to keep nurses on the job without a contract.

To deflect anger, the MNA-UMPNC called another demonstration, at 6:15 a.m. on Wednesday morning at the Adult Emergency Services entrance to the hospital. The union is encouraging workers to "wear red on Wednesdays to support our bargaining team and show our union pride." Negotiations are reported to resume Wednesday and Thursday this week.

At the same time, both management and the union have routinely attempted to block campaigners from the *World Socialist Web Site Health Care Workers Newsletter* from distributing material on public sidewalks in front of the hospital. Twice in the last month, management called security and campus police against those distributing material. This is not only an attack on the WSWS but on the freedom of speech for rank-and-file nurses. The reason for this is that the WSWS urges health care workers to oppose the closed-door conspiracy between management and the unions and establish democratic control over their struggle by forming a rank-and-file committee.

On Friday, several hospital workers spoke on their experiences. A young nurse said he was "pretty new but was not hearing anything." Responding to the paltry offer by Michigan Medicine, "with 5 percent raises and 9 percent inflation that's not good."

A high-seniority nurse spoke on the conditions since the beginning of the pandemic, "It used to be great until COVID. Since COVID it has been sh*t. People have left; they're stressed out. No one is replacing them. There is an increasing number of patients on shifts and it's unsafe. You get paranoid, angry and ornery. Patients sense it and you feel worse after work. Everyone makes mistakes, you're not perfect, mistakes will happen. It's sad, not joyful, coming to work. Two years of this, I know the pandemic is causing short staffing and every place is looking for someone to

© World Socialist Web Site

work.”

When he was asked about the claim that the hospital has no money, he replied, “I don’t think much of it because they’re building a billion-dollar building back here. I’m tired of that! They said the same thing in the last contract. When the Children’s Hospital was being built, the other workers said if nurses strike, they [would refuse to cross the picket line]. That will cost them [Michigan Medicine] tens of thousands of dollars. I’m sick of the president of the hospital getting huge bonuses for sitting on his butt. He didn’t do anything. We’re in the trenches. When we complained, managers came back at us saying they had given us $1,500 bonuses. For two years of stress and anxiety coming to work! 2020 was the worst. And we get $1,500 little bonuses that don’t do anything. Some of the older nurses told me about the 1989 strike, where a judge and the governor made them go back to work.”

Two other hospital workers responded in support of the nurses and about the overall conditions in the hospital. “This is the stuff we talk about every day. Our department is stressful. Sometimes we ask for changes. But depending on how serious it is, the slower the supervisors are.

“Temperature-wise it’s cool right now in the building, but in the beginning of the summer they told us it would ‘regulate.’ For a week it was super hot inside. It’s controlled but it is supposed to catch up over the course of a month.” He continued speaking on the conditions and the millions the hospital received in revenues. “The money isn’t coming this way. We get mandated sometimes. But certain situations with people who have children, they might let you go on time. But it depends on the supervisor. There is a standard but not when everyone is mandated.”

A coworker interjected, “Every business has pyramids, we’re at the bottom of that. All aspects are important but we’re looked past like we’re nothing to the hospital.”

A longtime nurse told the WSWS: “Hopefully things are going in the right direction. I have no idea of what their intentions are. They want to hold out on us. We have a new leader of the hospital and we barely know anything about him. We’re not taking gold away from them, we just want a decent living. Look at the University of Michigan portfolio, they’re making money hand over fist, the best in the world. Think about the credibility of this hospital. Remember in Obama’s years in office, the hospital said they were in the negative, but they received millions in research and lied to us about it? That breaks trust for us. The hospital [now] has billions of dollars and they have signs out here saying they appreciate us.”

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site