

# Why is the Michigan Medicine nurses' union abridging freedom of speech?

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*Are you a nurse or health care worker at Michigan Medicine? Contact the WSWWS 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.*

More than 6,000 Michigan Medicine nurses at University of Michigan Hospital have been working without a contract since July 1. Over the past six weeks, the Michigan Nurses Association-University of Michigan Professional Nurse Council (MNA-UMPNC) has conducted three rallies at which union bureaucrats and Democratic Party politicians have promised to “stand with the nurses.”

The union’s idea of standing with the nurses, however, has consisted of making polite appeals to the profit-hungry University of Michigan Board of Regents and keeping nurses in the dark regarding the contract negotiations with Michigan Medicine. At no point in this long process has any union bureaucrat uttered the word “strike” except to warn the rank-and-file that it is illegal for public-sector workers to strike.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has recently written on this issue, demonstrating that public sector workers can and do strike. In fact, as we pointed out, the year 1989 saw a determined strike by nurses at the University of Michigan. After 13 days, that strike was broken by means of an injunction overseen by the governor at the time, Democrat James Blanchard.

In the 2018 contract struggle, the nurses again voted overwhelmingly to strike, but the MNA-UMPNC never called a walkout.

By preventing strikes, the union keeps from workers the only leverage they have against management, the ability to withhold their labor. The result for Michigan Medicine nurses, as for all workers represented by today’s unions, has been a long string of concessions contracts.

Now the union wants to tell nurses how they may and may not speak.

## A Facebook prohibition

On August 9, Renee Curtis, president of the MNA-UMPNC, issued an edict for all Michigan Medicine nurses on the union’s official Facebook page. In response to a post by a rank-and-file nurse urging that nurses consider refusing to volunteer for overtime to put more pressure on the university during contract talks, Curtis moved quickly to pour water on that spark.

In a post under the heading “DO and DON’Ts of POSTING ON FACEBOOK,” Curtis took it upon herself to gag the membership. Her post reads, in part:

We CANNOT engage or promote a work stoppage of any kind without proper cause or notification. This also means members

cannot make posts that encourage any action of this nature.

These claims are nonsense, and nurses must not be intimidated by the union’s scare tactics. Curtis can no more forbid nurses from posting what they want on Facebook than she can tell them what they may and may not talk about in the break rooms.

Curtis’s post raises the fundamental issue of freedom of speech. It is worth quoting the First Amendment to the Constitution in full:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

While technically the amendment restricts the actions of the government, the principle in this case is the same. The union bureaucracy is blatantly seeking to abridge nurses’ freedom of speech.

Are Michigan Medicine nurses obliged—along with handing over hundreds of hard-earned dollars every year to the union bureaucracy, or more precisely, having it automatically taken out of their paychecks—to also forgo their basic democratic rights?

Consider the message Curtis has attempted to silence. The nurse in question did not even call for a strike, only for “withholding labor related to volunteering” for overtime “upon the announcement of new incentives.” The union bureaucracy is telling nurses they may not talk about not volunteering! Can this be considered the conduct of a democratic organization?

And what can Curtis possibly mean by “proper cause or notification”? Michigan Medicine nurses have been working for six weeks without a contract! That alone is cause enough, and many nurses are coming to the conclusion that the time has come for a work stoppage. That the union bureaucracy is blocking such a move only exposes the MNA-UMPNC’s complicity in the health system and the Board of Regents’ exploitation of nurses at Michigan Medicine.

As for posting on the union bureaucracy’s “official” Facebook page, the analogy would be to a meeting in a union hall. Here members should be in charge and should feel free to say whatever is on their minds. For many decades, however, union bureaucrats in all industries have strong-armed dissenting workers into silence at meetings by cutting off their microphones, shouting them down and carrying out reprisals against those workers who dare to speak up.

Curtis is no less arrogant in her attempt to silence nurses, who are becoming increasingly frustrated and vocal about the bureaucracy’s collusion with Michigan Medicine. In fact, Curtis’s gag order represents

clearly the anti-democratic nature of the union and the bureaucracy's attitude toward the membership.

Why, for instance, have negotiations been kept behind closed doors? All negotiations should be live-streamed so that members can follow them with full knowledge of the proceedings. That is how a democratic organization would conduct its business.

Further, and critically, by reviewing the minutes of a Board of Regents meeting with the executive team of the MNA-UMPNC held on July 21 in the Upper Peninsula, the *World Socialist Web Site* learned that the Board of Regents reported as an Item of Information a request by the university for formal mediation with the MNA-UMPNC.

The union bureaucracy never shared this crucial information with the membership. Are the current negotiations between the union and the Board of Regents being held under mediation? Nurses have a right to know.

Such secretive and anti-democratic conduct on the part of the MNA-UMPNC drives home the point that nurses cannot trust the local executive team or the bureaucracy of the MNA. Democracy and transparency are hallmarks of a genuine workers' organization, and they are utterly absent from the MNA-UMPNC.

### The role of the union

As the WSWs wrote last Friday, today's unions bear no resemblance to the fighting organizations of an earlier era, when pitched battles and sit-down strikes, often led by socialists, won gains for organized workers in the form of higher wages, better working conditions and better hours. We said:

They [the unions] have been transformed into organizations that rob workers of billions of dollars in dues money in order to enrich bureaucrats who live comfortable lives in the richest 10 percent of American society. They suppress the class struggle and form a critical part of the Democratic Party and the imperialist state.

Unions today are the hollow shells of yesterday's workers' organizations, controlled by bureaucratic parasites whose mission statement is "To provide management with cheap labor, to suppress strikes and to collect dues." The dues money is the incentive for selling out the membership.

Michigan Medicine nurses, as we recently reported, pay \$62.03 a month in dues to the MNA-UMPNC. This does not include the undisclosed amount nurses pay in dues to the local. We wrote:

Some \$4,615,000 from 6,200 Michigan Medicine nurses' paychecks go to the MNA each year in the form of dues.

Nurses have a right to ask: Where is this money going? Is the union using the money to fight for them? The answer is obvious, and nurses must draw the necessary conclusions.

A real workers' organization would be fighting tooth and nail against a wealthy and avaricious employer. Michigan Medicine reported a \$339.8 million "operating margin" (the system is technically not-for-profit) for 2021. Its parent company, the University of Michigan, is one of the nation's wealthiest universities, with assets of \$19.5 billion in fiscal year

2021. This wealth is in part due to billions in investments in hedge funds run by contributors to the university. This may be legal, but that does make it any less corrupt.

The union has consistently told its membership that it cannot call a strike absent an unfair labor practice on the part of Michigan Medicine. But according to the MNA-UMPNC website, Michigan Medicine is "bargaining in bad faith." Under the National Labor Relations Act, this is grounds for a charge of unfair labor practices. Yet the union refuses to even call a strike vote.

### Rank-and-file committee

The only way forward for Michigan Medicine nurses is to take their struggle into their own hands. It is certain that the MNA-UMPNC will not represent their interests in any way, and nurses must organize themselves independently of the union. The way to do this is to form a rank-and-file committee.

The rank-and-file committee, an independent and democratic body, should immediately demand a strike vote and a date certain to launch a strike, to continue until the demands of the nurses are met. The WSWs suggests that these demands include:

- Safe staffing ratios, which requires hiring more nurses
- A pay raise of 15 percent plus monthly cost-of-living adjustments
- An end to mandatory overtime

Nurses must join their struggle to that of all other employees at Michigan Medicine and to the struggles of health care workers throughout Michigan and across the country. They should broaden their struggle to link up with those of autoworkers, teachers, logistics workers and others who are likewise fighting against inflation, impossible hours and understaffing.

A strike by Michigan Medicine nurses, especially one led by a rank-and-file committee, would send a lightning bolt through the profit-driven health care industry. Health care workers everywhere would take courage from the nurses' struggle. Such a strike would be the first step in the mobilization of the working class against a system that has proven it values profits over life.



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