

Michigan Medicine nurses' union announces "work stoppage" authorization vote

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The union representing 6,200 nurses at Michigan Medicine in Ann Arbor, Michigan, announced on Thursday that it was holding a "work stoppage authorization vote" in a series of special meetings to be held between August 27 and September 2.

Nurses and their supporters were informed of the planned vote at a town hall speakout on Thursday evening at a union hall of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) in Ann Arbor. Along with nurses, there were transit workers, electricians and other skilled trades union members in attendance.

The speakout event featured speeches delivered by union bureaucrats, such as former UAW International President Bob King, and Democratic Party state legislators, including Michigan state Representative Yousef Rabhi and State Senator Jeff Mirwin, who all professed to the nurses that they "have your back."

A statement published on the website of the Michigan Nurses Association-University of Michigan Professional Nurse Council (MNA-UMPNC) said the vote was a response "to management's disrespectful and improper actions" and called on nurses "to vote on the authorization of a work stoppage for the purpose of protesting the university's alleged unfair labor practices."

The union said the authorization vote "will decide whether to stop work to protest management's unfair labor practices. These include, but aren't limited to, charges of bad faith bargaining, improper changes to our working conditions, and the undermining of our elected union." The MNA-UMPNC also stated it "alleges this conduct is a violation of Michigan Public Employees Relations Act (PERA)."

The reference to "unfair labor practices" demonstrates that the union has no intention of conducting any struggle to win substantial wage

increases, improvements in benefits or alleviate the terrible working conditions for the nurses, particularly overwork and understaffing.

An unfair labor practices strike, according to federal rules, is one where the union does not raise any of the usual contractual issues but instead charges management with failure to bargain in good faith. The union can call off the strike at any point, citing an agreement by U-M management to resume bargaining, without any progress at all on the substance of the issues facing nurses.

The town hall meeting on Thursday evening also included statements from rank-and-file nurses who described the unsafe and intolerable conditions at Michigan Medicine. An Adult ER nurse said, "We are drowning, with no surface in sight. We need help. Now."

A nurse who works in the NICU said, "I have constant nightmares and sleepless nights, because my stress and anxiety about missing something or forgetting something because I was so busy during my shift wears on me daily."

The announcement by the MNA-UMPNC that it will hold the authorization vote is clearly in response to the mounting demands for action by nurses at Michigan Medicine. After the MNA-UMPNC allowed the previous contract to expire nearly 50 days ago and refused to prepare for or call a strike vote, the growing anger and determination of nurses to fight the staffing shortage has forced the union to take this step.

However, nurses must be warned that the union bureaucracy is using the vote as a pressure tactic and doing everything possible to reach a sellout agreement with Michigan Medicine before a strike can be called. This is clear by the way the vote is being started more than week from now and then stretched out into the

Labor Day weekend.

Meanwhile, if a strike does take place, the union will attempt to isolate the nurses from the other employees at Michigan Medicine as well as health care workers throughout the state of Michigan who are facing the exact same struggles. Everything the union has done up to this point, including concealing from nurses what has been going on in the negotiations and refusing to prepare for strike action, proves that the union leadership is not on the same side as the nurses in this fight.

For example, even the language of a “work stoppage” instead of a “strike,” as well as the legal filings by the MNA-UMPNC with the Michigan Employment Relations Commission (MERC) and the Michigan Court of Claims that the hospital is engaged in “unfair labor practices”—even though this is absolutely true—show that the union is seeking to prevent the nurses’ struggle from taking on the necessary political character that will be required to achieve a victory.

The reason the MNA-UMPNC invited union bureaucrats like Bob King and Democratic Party politicians to address the meeting on Thursday is because they hope to strangle and shut down any mass struggle that emerges in the coming weeks against the University of Michigan leadership, themselves mostly Democrats, and the hospital. The union apparatus is concerned that a drawn-out fight by nurses and hospital employees against Michigan Medicine will disrupt their campaign for the reelection of Governor Gretchen Whitmer and other leading Democratic state officials.

The union’s MERC filing has revealed that the hospital’s bargaining position, as early as May 9, has been that staffing ratios are not a “mandatory” negotiating issue because they do not pertain to “employee safety.” This is an outrageous example of the attitude of hospital management to the nurses. There can be no doubt that a walkout by Michigan Medicine nurses will encounter a ferocious response by the entire corporate and political establishment which the MNA-UMPNC union bureaucracy serves.

Nurses must begin preparing now for this struggle by organizing a rank-and-file committee that will take the conduct of the fight against the Michigan Medicine out of the hands of the union leadership. Such a committee must be democratically elected by the rank and file from among the most trusted nurses, and it must put

forward demands that are based on what is needed by hospital employees and not what management or the union says is achievable or possible.



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