

Nurses vote by 96 percent for strike action against Michigan Medicine

Kevin Reed
2 September 2022

On Friday, the Michigan Nurses Association (MNA) and University of Michigan Professional Nurse Council (UMPNC) announced that nurses at Michigan Medicine voted by 96 percent to go on strike against the fifth largest hospital system in the state. Some 4,000 of the system's 6,200 nurses turned out and cast votes at meetings held over the past week.

The overwhelming vote authorizing strike action is an expression of the anger and determination of nurses to fight against the intolerable working conditions at the hospital and health care system operated by the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

The sentiment among the nurses has been in favor of a walkout since the contract negotiations with the hospital began last March. The primary issue has been chronic understaffing and overwork, especially following mass layoffs of support staff and widespread resignations of senior nurses at Michigan Medicine during the coronavirus pandemic.

While the 6,200 nurses have expressed their determination to fight the hospital system's staffing policies, the union has opposed the mobilization of the membership along with other hospital employees needed to take forward their struggle and win their demands.

Even now, in announcing the overwhelming support for strike action, the MNA-UMPNC leadership has provided no information about what nurses must do to prepare for a walkout or respond to the hospital's plans to hire strikebreakers.

This is not surprising. Having done everything possible to discourage nurses from authorizing strike action, the union bureaucracy is now busily working behind the scenes in an effort to settle with Michigan Medicine, betray the nurses' demands and prevent a strike from ever taking place.

That this is the case is proven by everything the MNA-UMPNC leadership has done up to this point. For four months the union maintained that strike action was out of the question because it was illegal for public employees to walk off the job over contract issues.

Even though public employees, including University of Michigan nurses, have taken strike action many times since the passage of the 1965 Michigan Public Employee Relations Act, the union claimed that a strike could only take place for unfair labor practice reasons.

The union kept nurses in the dark about what was going on in the negotiations and never reported that Michigan Medicine had declared any attempt by the MNA-UMPNC to put forward mandatory staffing ratios an "illegal bargaining issue." The union also refused to put forward any demands on working conditions, pay rates, pandemic policies and personal protective equipment or benefits.

Then on August 16, when it was clear that the 6,200 nurses would not accept Michigan Medicine's refusal to negotiate mandatory staffing ratios, the MNA-UMPNC was forced to file multiple unfair labor practice charges against the university through the Michigan Employment Relations Commission (MERC) and on August 19 to call a strike authorization vote.

Even after the previous contract expired on July 1, the MNA-UMPNC told nurses to put their faith in the University of Michigan Board of Regents, which is dominated by Democratic Party representatives, as the way to secure their interests. The union also held a rally and informational picket on July 16 at which strike action was never mentioned, but nurses were presented with Democratic Party US Representative Debbie Dingell and Michigan AFL-CIO President Ron Bieber, who said, "We have your back."

Now the Board of Regents and the administration of

the University of Michigan are behind a plan by Michigan Medicine to hire “replacement nurses” as scabs in the event of a strike by nurses, and Dingell and Bieber are completely silent.

It was the *WSWS Rank-and-File Health Care Workers Newsletter* that raised the demand for a strike vote and preparations for a strike, and the formation of a rank-and-file committee independent of the union to lead the struggle. Earlier this week, a rank-and-committee was formed and published a statement to the nurses and entire hospital staff.

The determination of nurses to wage a battle against the hospital stands in stark contrast to the entire record of the MNA-UMPNC throughout the struggle. That the union is working to sabotage strike action is also proven by giving Michigan Medicine 10 days to “prepare” for a walkout and telling nurses that they will receive no strike pay while they are on the picket line.

Nurses who spoke to the *WSWS Health Care Workers Newsletter* during the week expressed their disgust over the intolerable conditions at the hospital. One nurse said, “Nurses are very angry and the top nursing manager, Nancy May, got a 28 percent raise in 2021 and another 16 percent in 2022. Her salary was increased during the pandemic and she can work from home. She is at a half-million in pay now.”

A nurse who has worked for the Ann Arbor Medical Center for more than four decades said, “I heard that [Michigan Medicine was hiring replacement nurses]. It doesn’t surprise me at all. I think they’re a**holes... Nothing has been getting better for years. I’ve been saying this is like corporate America. If they could make you pay to work here they wouldn’t bat an eyelash, if they could get away with it.”

The nurse went on: “In the 1980s, I saw it coming. I said they’re more and more going towards corporate types running it, rather than old doctors who are really doctors and realize the impact of this stuff. And here we are. Chief of medicine and lawyers are running it. I respect both the professions, but this is why you have to have government and laws to protect us from people like this. I’m lucky since I’m collecting Social Security. I’m not retiring because I like working. I support the workers in this.”

When asked about joint strike action by all hospital employees, another nurse said, “They definitely don’t want that because it’ll show they don’t care about their

workers. It would be a major thing.” She went on to talk about the policies of the union: “Why are we listening to Dingell? All parties are for the system. I agree with you on the union bureaucrats. If they don’t have strike pay, that’ll kibosh the strike. Just like my dad when he was on strike in the South, he had all these side jobs.”

On the formation of a rank-and-file committee of Michigan Medicine employees to take forward the fight against the hospital in opposition to the union leadership, she said, “I’m interested in this. They brought in a new university president with a paid house and driver. Then they paid off Schlissel [former University of Michigan president]. I was naïve. Now U of M is preparing strikebreakers.”

The Michigan Medicine Rank-and-File Committee (MMRFC) issued a statement on Wednesday calling on nurses to vote “Yes” and immediately prepare strike action to mobilize the hospital staff and university community behind them. The MMRFC statement said, “We have formed the MMRFC to unite all employees at Michigan Medicine in a common struggle for what we need, not what the hospital or the union says is possible.”

The MMRFC statement warns that if the union cannot block a strike from taking place, “it will try to isolate us, starve us out and ram through a deal that meets none of our demands.”

It continues: “Therefore, after voting ‘Yes’ to authorize the strike, we must prepare the joint mobilization of the entire staff at Michigan Medicine, along with students and University of Michigan employees, behind the nurses. The threat to hire strikebreaking nurses is a serious one and must be answered with mass action to shut down the hospital to insure that the nurses win their demands and take forward the political fight, along with other sections of the working class, against the capitalist system.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact