

Reject union protests to University of Michigan Board of Regents Demand immediate strike action at Michigan Medicine

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Are you a nurse or health care worker at Michigan Medicine? Do you want to join the Michigan Medicine Rank-and-File Committee? 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.

The rally and protest to the University of Michigan Board of Regents meeting on Thursday—organized by the Michigan Nurses Association (MNA) and its local affiliate, the University of Michigan Professional Nurse Council (UMPNC)—is the latest attempt by the union to channel the anger and militancy of Michigan Medicine nurses into useless appeals to corporate health care interests and their political representatives in the Democratic Party who sit on the board.

After three previous protests at regents' meetings resolved nothing about unsafe staffing conditions and mandatory overtime facing 6,200 nurses at the Michigan Medicine, why would more appeals to the same millionaires and billionaires on the board do anything to advance the nurses' fight? To ask the question is to answer it.

It has been 12 weeks since the contract at Michigan Medicine expired, and three weeks since nurses voted by 96 percent to approve strike action against the \$5 billion health care system operated by the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

As each day passes, the hospital administration is being allowed by the MNA-UMPNC to continue exploiting nurses on the floor amid the catastrophic staffing shortage. The unions are giving time to management to prepare the hiring of replacement nurses to offset the impact of any strike.

The truth is that Michigan Medicine nurses are in a powerful position to go on the offensive and win their demands. The overwhelming vote for strike action is part of a growing movement by health care workers and working people in the US and around the world against exhausting work hours, the erosion of living standards by inflation and management abuse. In every case these struggles are emerging as a direct conflict between rank-and-file workers against the union bureaucracies, which have facilitated decades of corporate and government attacks on living standards, working conditions and basic

rights.

Like striking mental health care nurses at Kaiser Permanente in California, the 15,000 Minnesota nurses who struck for three days earlier in the month, and Kaleida health care workers in Western New York who voted 96 percent to strike last week, Michigan Medicine nurses have shown their determination to fight.

The nurses' movement is also taking place alongside a rebellion by railroad workers against the Biden administration and the treachery of labor unions. On September 14, a meeting of 500 railroaders passed a resolution opposing the sellout agreement between their unions and Biden and pledged to fight for a national rail strike to win their demands to end to impossible working conditions.

Autoworkers are also mounting an independent struggle against decades of betrayals by the corporatist union bureaucracy through the campaign of Will Lehman, a Pennsylvania Mack Trucks worker and socialist who is running for international president of the UAW. Lehman's campaign to restore power to the rank and file and abolish the corrupt UAW apparatus is winning widespread support by UAW members in factories and workplaces around the country.

Since the beginning of their contract negotiations six months ago, Michigan Medicine nurses have been fighting not only management but the MNA-UMPNC apparatus, which has collaborated with hospital management, isolated the nurses' struggle and blocked the mass action required to win their fight.

At first, the union told nurses that a strike was illegal because, as public employees, they were barred by state law in Michigan from organizing a walkout. Then, when it became clear that hospital management would not discuss the issue of staffing ratios, the union knew that nurses would not accept a sellout agreement and was forced to file an unfair labor practice charge and hold the strike authorization vote.

Before the strike vote was held, MNA-UMPNC officials told nurses that there would be no strike pay in the event of a walkout. Throughout this period, the statewide MNA was preoccupied with endorsing Democratic Party candidates for the upcoming midterm elections and refused to even report the

struggle unfolding at Michigan Medicine.

Once the strike authorization vote was held, the MNA-UMPNC quickly announced it was returning to the bargaining table even though management has continued to treat nurses with contempt. A union report on September 8 admitted that management came to negotiations “empty-handed and stalled the process over two days by asking questions about why we want what is in our proposals.”

One day later, at bargaining information meetings, the MNA-UMPNC said it had no intention of using the strike vote to organize a walkout. Local President Renee Curtis told nurses that the 96 percent vote for strike authorization was being used as “leverage” to convince the university to “do the right thing.”

In response to demands for strike action, Curtis also attempted to blame nurses for the union’s foot-dragging, by saying, “All of you have to stand up. I cannot carry the cross for you guys.” She also told members she had met with “political influencers” in the office of Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer. At the same time, the MNA-UMPNC announced another useless rally and protest to Democratic Party millionaires and billionaires on the University of Michigan Board of Regents meeting on September 22.

Health care workers everywhere want to fight. But the biggest obstacle to unifying workers in a common fight against the for-profit health care system are the corporatist unions. This is evident from the following:

- In **Northern California**, 2,000 Kaiser Permanente mental health employees, including those from Hawaii, have been on strike for five weeks against severe understaffing. The workers are fighting the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) which is isolating them and attempting to starve them out by refusing to provide any strike pay. The NUHW has instead organized donation-based “hardship funds” and paraded various Democratic Party politicians on the picket line for photo-ops.

- In **Minnesota**, the Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA) ended a three-day strike of 15,000 nurses without a contract addressing unmanageable staffing ratios and pay increases that do not keep up with inflation. In response to demands from nurses to launch an open-ended strike, the MNA gave the hospital systems plenty of time to prepare in advance to hire replacement nurses.

- In **Buffalo, New York**, 6,300 employees at Kaleida Health voted by 96 percent to go on strike for higher wages and increased staffing to stop staff burnout and to ensure adequate patient care. However, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and Communications Workers of America (CWA) have kept workers on the job almost four months since the expiration on their contract, refusing to call a strike.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained from the beginning, the path to victory for Michigan Medicine nurses lies in taking matters into their own hands through the building of a rank-and-file committee. Such a committee provides the

means for nurses to democratically communicate with each other, outline their own demands and link up their struggle with hundreds of thousands of workers in health care and other industries.

The Michigan Medicine Rank-and-File Committee (MMRFC) has been formed to unite all hospital employees and break through the isolation and subordination of their struggle to the union’s unfair labor practices filing and Democratic Party officials.

The MMRFC has advanced the following demands:

Immediate strike action against Michigan Medicine.

- **Safe nurse-to-patient ratios that are mandatory and nonnegotiable. Michigan Medicine must hire enough nurses to guarantee a safe working environment for employees and patients**

- **End the mandatory overtime and extended on-call hours that have destroyed the work-life balance of nurses. All overtime must be voluntary and on-call hours eliminated.**

- **An inflation-busting 30 percent wage increase to make up for years of declining real wages, plus a cost-of-living escalator to keep pace with inflation.**

- **Upgrades to PPE against COVID-19 and monkeypox. We need sufficient protective equipment, including well-fitting masks that are N95 or better, to protect our patients and ourselves.**

- **Full strike pay provided by the MNA-UMPNC and the Michigan AFL-CIO.**

- **Answer strikebreaking with a general strike of Michigan labor!**

Like their counterparts at Beaumont-Spectrum, Kaiser Permanente, Kaleida and other health care giants, the wealthy executives and board members at Michigan Medicine insist they cannot afford the such completely justified demands.

That only underscores the fact that nurses are engaged not simply in a trade union struggle but a class and political struggle against the subordination of health care to profit. That is why the growing strike movement of health care workers and other sections of the working class must be combined with the fight to take profit out of medicine by establishing a socialist health care system, which will guarantee free, high-quality health care as a social right for all.



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