

Strike and lockout of nurses at Ascension Providence Hospital in Detroit suburb

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On September 11, management at Ascension Providence Rochester Hospital locked out striking registered nurses (RN) and radiology technologists (RT). These workers are represented by the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) Local 40.

The workers voted at the end of August by 99 percent for a three-day strike due to multiple allegations of unfair labor practices at the hospital. Ascension responded to the workers with a provocation. They turned the strike into a four-day lockout, announcing that the contract they settled for nurses from a staffing agency required they work as strikebreakers for at least four days.

While the union has not published the exact number of workers it represents, Ascension Providence is a large hospital with 226 beds. According to tax records available on *ProPublica*, the hospital treated 11,034 patients in the fiscal year 2022 and had 1,619 employees. The hospital is owned by Ascension Health, a Catholic nonprofit.

The OPEIU has been negotiating with Ascension Providence since last year. They allege that the hospital is not cooperating in negotiations and is engaging in unfair labor practices (ULP). A poster for the strike made by the union also names “lack of patient safety, recruitment, retention, respect” as other reasons for the strike.

An undated letter, apparently written before the strike vote, from the local’s bargaining team to the hospital’s Board of Trustees provides further details of what workers are confronting at Ascension Providence.

As in hospitals throughout the state and the country, Providence is constantly losing staff due to abysmally low wages. According to the letter, the wages paid at Providence are lower than at other Ascension hospitals

in the area. While Ascension will not disclose wages at other locations, the union claims to have paystub evidence proving that RNs and RTs at other Ascension hospitals make wages that are “significantly higher” than the top wage in the third year of Providence’s current contract proposal.

Among the ULP charges filed by the union against Ascension Providence is one that implies a conspiracy by the hospital to casualize its workforce. According to the bargaining team’s letter, the hospital will hire temporary RNs for as much as \$100 per hour, citing the critical shortage. The union asserts that the hospital is doing this deliberately to limit the number of union nurses on staff.

However, this is not an attack directed at the OPEIU. The drive to casualize the healthcare workforce is a broad, worldwide initiative with the objective to divide healthcare workers and prevent, above all, rank-and-file organizing among them. Companies may use extraordinary wages now to draw workers into this gig economy, but such wages are a temporary expedient and will quickly be phased out once an even minimal staff is in place.

The OPEIU has called the strike, not from the perspective of resisting a broader attack on the working class, but to allow the nurses to blow off steam and to enforce the union’s claim on dues money from the workforce.

RNs and RTs at Ascension Providence should put no faith in the OPEIU bureaucracy to fight for their interests. Before even taking a strike authorization vote, Local 40’s bargaining team wrote their letter begging the hospital’s Board of Trustees to make management see reason. Such phony appeals for the capitalists to do the right thing serve only to demoralize and betray workers.

The purpose of the three-day strike is to isolate and exhaust the registered nurses and radiology techs at Ascension Providence. The OPEIU has not attempted to coordinate joint action between these and other workers at the hospital, or with workers at other Ascension facilities in the area.

This is a deliberate policy on the part of the union bureaucracy, a standard operating procedure in most such strikes, and not only in health care. The OPEIU has no shortage of other workers to call on for joint action. Local 40 also represents registered nurses and service workers at McLaren-Macomb Hospital, a 288-bed training hospital in Mt. Clemens, Michigan, in neighboring Macomb County. According to its website, the OPEIU represents over 100,000 workers in the US and Canada.

The local president and regional vice president of the OPEIU, Dina Carlisle, outlined what the union hopes to accomplish at Ascension Providence with this strike:

“It is our hope that this situation serves as a wake-up call to the administration, urging them to reevaluate their priorities and actively address the concerns raised by those advocating for patients’ safety and protections. The well-being of the patients should always be at the forefront of any healthcare institution, and it is high time that the administration aligns their actions with this essential principle and core Catholic values.”

In other words, the union plans to address itself to the “good Catholic” side of management. Such an appeal is destined to fall on deaf ears.

According to the hospital’s latest tax filings, accessed via *ProPublica*, Dr. Jeffery Declaire, the hospital’s director, saw his salary almost triple to \$1.3 million from the previous year, on par with CEO Christopher Palazzolo, who left the hospital in April 2022. The new CEO, Gary Druskovich, made \$648,412 for the time he worked that year.

Clearly, even nonprofit hospitals are run just like any for-profit company: vast sums go to pay the bloated salaries of top management. Ascension Providence’s tax records are consistent with this reality. The most recent return, covering the hospital’s tax year from 2021-2022 (the hospital’s tax years go from July 1 to June 30), shows that the hospital paid nearly \$1.6 million more in salaries to executives and directors than the year before, although revenue only grew by 0.34

percent during the same period.

Total salary expenditure rose by \$15 million, or 16.23 percent, but this didn’t improve the position of workers on the hospital staff. Instead, the bulk of it was spent on travel nurses and other contract employees as part of the hospital’s drive for casualization.

In addition to appealing to the hospital’s Board of Trustees and management, the OPEIU has made appeals to capitalist politicians. They have gone so far as to ask that Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel and Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald investigate the hospital for its illegal, unfair labor practices. And yet the union expects workers to believe this same hospital will come back with a better deal after a three-day strike.

The provocation by Ascension Providence, turning the planned strike into a lockout, shows clearly how the hospital will treat its workers. It is not by appealing to management to do the right thing or to the state that registered nurses and radiology techs will win their demands. Instead, they must form their own rank-and-file committees and fight to link up with other workers at Ascension Providence and other hospitals in the area.



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