

Hospital workers in Bay City, Michigan protest starvation wages

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On September 13, UNITE-HERE Local 24 held an informational picket of about 300 support staff at McLaren Bay Region Hospital in Bay City, Michigan. The workers in Local 24 are nurse aides, nurse clerks, surgical support teams, housekeeping, maintenance, and others.

The previous contract for these workers expired in February 2023. Workers recently voted by 99 percent to authorize a strike, decisively rejecting the hospital's latest contract offer. Since then, management has refused to budge from its position.

The workers at McLaren Bay Region confront similar conditions to those of healthcare workers around the country, including unsafe staffing levels and extremely low pay.

The 415-bed acute care hospital is part of the \$6.6 billion McLaren Health Care system, which comprises 28,000 employees and provides services to 732,838 people in Michigan and Indiana. Local 24 is also part of a much larger organization: UNITE HERE, affiliated with the AFL-CIO, has 300,000 members, but the union provides little to no support to health care workers fighting corporate giants.

Despite the system's nonprofit status, McLaren Bay Region is run like a for-profit company: the income goes to fund the bloated salaries of executives and top managers. According to tax records from *ProPublica*, in the fiscal year 2021 the hospital paid its highest-paid employees nearly \$10.7 million, an increase of almost \$2.5 million from the previous year. This increase accounts for more than 9 percent of the increase in the hospital's net revenue during the same period.

At the picket, workers spoke with WNEM 5 about what the conditions are in the hospital.

Kristy Ahler, an emergency room nursing clerk and shop steward, said, "We have emergency rooms that

are full of patients, that our average wait time is four to six hours. Safe patient ratios, competitive and fair wages, we're short-staffed all the time, and there's little to no end to this. Every single day we come in and we have floors that are short, every single day."

Karen Lowery, an endoscopic patient care associate, told reporters, "We had a girl the other night who worked on the floor by herself, and she had 30 patients she had to care for. If you do the math, that's one patient every two minutes. That's not enough care; would you want someone to give two minutes to your mother if she were here? It's not right, McLaren. People should make more than \$13 per hour in today's society."

The pay scales in the expired contract, negotiated by Unite Here in 2021, reveal the poverty wages which McLaren Bay Region pays its employees. The lowest paid workers were patient safety associates, whose starting wage upon ratification was \$11.30 per hour, with a maximum of \$15.64 after February 2022. Nurse assistants had a starting wage of \$14 on ratification and maxed out at a mere \$19.12 after February 2022.

Other workers in Unite Here making starvation wages under the last contract include: dietary and environmental services aides (\$11.92 to \$16.18), transporters, rehab aides and surgical support associates (\$12.74 to \$18.15), cardiac care endo PPH care associates (\$13.17 to \$19.15), custodians and storekeepers (\$13.00 to \$17.76), cooks (\$13.83 to \$19.20), lab assistant II, OB care and patient care associates (\$14.28 to \$19.80), and lab technical assistants (\$15.57 to \$21.60).

Workers should not put their faith in the Unite Here bureaucracy to organize a fight for higher salaries or safe staffing requirements. This is the same union which negotiated the poverty wages against which

workers are fighting in the first place. Sharron Adlam, a health unit coordinator and union organizer, told WNEM 5 that, while support staff are willing to strike, the union claims to hope that management will come back with a better offer. In fact, president and CEO Darrell Lentz has stated that management will ignore the pickets in negotiations.

Shop steward Ahler laid out the union's strategy quite clearly: "We're not here to hurt McLaren, we're just here to make things right with our members."

An informational picket by itself will not encourage McLaren Bay Region to "make things right" and provide decent wages or guarantees for safe staffing. Instead of accepting the defeatist strategy of hoping the company will "make things right," support staff at McLaren Bay Region must take their struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucrats, forming rank-and-file committees to unite with healthcare workers across the country.

The support staff at McLaren Bay Region are not alone in their fight. Currently, 1,700 nurses at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in New Jersey have waged a six-week struggle without strike pay, demanding guarantees of safe staffing. Recently, 85,000 workers for Kaiser Permanente, whose contract is set to expire at the end of the month, voted by 98 percent to authorize a strike.

Unite Here has no intention of uniting the struggle of support staff at McLaren Bay Region with their class brothers and sisters around the country and the world. Such a strategy is only possible by building committees of rank-and-file workers that can unite the struggles of all health care workers.



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