

Michigan Blue Cross workers kept in dark as UAW isolates strike

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More than one thousand workers at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan remain on strike in Detroit, South Lyon, Lansing and Grand Rapids. The strikers are customer service, claims, billing and maintenance workers, members of the UAW Locals 1781, 2500, 2145 and 2256.

Workers walked out on September 13 and have been picketing the offices of the health insurance giant for six weeks. BCBSM is the largest health insurance company in the state. The strikers are demanding an end to pay tiers, significant increases in wages and benefits and a halt to the replacement of jobs through outsourcing of services to independent contractors.

Aside from mouthing a few empty words, UAW President Shawn Fain has done nothing to support the strike. There is not even a reference to the bitter six-week strike on the UAW International website at uaw.org.

By isolating the BCBSM workers, the UAW has given the company a free hand to intransigently oppose the demands of workers. This has also been combined with a complete lack of information and transparency on the part of the union apparatus regarding the status of the contract negotiations.

This is not just the usual bureaucratic treatment of the rank and file, which autoworkers have seen in a hundred strikes in recent decades. The UAW is literally on the same side as management, given that four UAW officials, along with four other union bureaucrats, sit on the board of directors of BCBSM, whose dominance of the Michigan market is based historically on the company's promotion by the UAW and the AFL-CIO.

One of eight union bureaucrats is Ron Bieber, president of the Michigan State AFL-CIO, with over one million active and retired members who could be mobilized to support the strikers. His father, Owen

Bieber, then the president of the UAW, personally oversaw the sellout of the 1987 BCBSM strike.

The information blackout comes as Fain and the rest of the UAW bureaucracy try to ram through sellout contracts on 146,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers that would pave the way for a massive attack on jobs and living standards.

This situation has opened the door for BCBSM management to absurdly posture as defenders of the “spirit of collective bargaining.” On October 23, BCBSM Executive Vice President Darrell Middleton sent a letter to the striking workers that said, “We find it necessary now to go outside that process and directly to you, because we don’t believe you are being given all the information you need about what’s going on inside the room.”

Middleton goes on to say that “we are reaching out to inform you of management’s latest offer to the union” and claim that this offer “addresses the most critical issues brought to the table by the union.” He says it is the best ever presented to the UAW members.

However, the offer in no way addresses workers’ demands. It would raise the wage of new hires from \$15 to \$18 per hour and cuts the length of time to reach top pay from 22 years down to 10 years. It has an insulting \$750 cost-of-living pay adjustment each year.

The contract plan would maintain the hated tiered-wage structure. In response to the demand for an end to outsourcing jobs, the company makes the completely unconvincing statement that “management commits to expanding opportunities for the bargaining unit workforce.”

It should be pointed out that as an officer, Executive VP Middleton earns an annual salary of somewhere between \$221,000 and \$321,000, according to salary.com. Middleton is one of 15 top officers at

BCBSM. When Middleton refers to the “critical importance of maintaining the affordability of health care and health insurance for our members and employer group customers,” he is not looking at the officers’ bloated salaries. He is saying that the interests of workers must be subordinated to the corporate interests and executive salaries of BCBSM.

Two days after Middleton’s message, the UAW International Secretary-Treasurer Margaret Mock responded to BCBSM offer with a cynical letter to the striking workers. After leaving the BCBSM workers in the dark about what has been happening in the contract fight, Mock writes, “We could not accept this final offer without a commitment to safeguards for our families.”

Mock then goes on to spell out “omissions and facts that Mr. Middleton neglected to share with you.” The UAW bureaucrat, who will rake in a salary of more than \$200,000, goes on to point out the obvious falsehoods from the BCBSM executive and then calls on workers to “contact Mr. Middleton and ask him why job security, outsourcing, and taking care of our brothers and sisters isn’t a critical component of our agreement.”

The UAW bureaucrats are opposed to any real fight by BCBSM workers because this would cut across the union’s collaboration with the auto companies and the Democratic Party.

The opposition of rank-and-file workers to the betrayal of the strike at BCBSM has been expressed on social media. One worker wrote on Facebook, “If it was not for the company we would not have any idea what the company was offering. The union has shown zero transparency during these negotiations.”

The worker also pointed out the contempt that UAW President Shawn Fain showed toward the BCBSM strikers when he failed to show up for a scheduled meeting with BCBSM’s CEO. The worker wrote, “This response also did not address the claim that Fain requested a meeting with Daniel Loepp and no showed that meeting.”

Another worker wrote, “The UAW letter is cute just like the BCBSM letter was cute. Many of us been asking about this type of information just to hear crickets. It took the company to play chess while the union played checkers for the membership to get any information of substance. What were they doing for

two months at the negotiating table before the strike vote? And this unorganized strike at that.”

A third worker wrote, “We are out here blind. It should’ve never took for the company to send a letter out for the union to give an update. Had BCBSM never did that, we still would be out here with no information. All the union is doing is playing damage control right now. You can’t be mad or shocked that the membership is in an uproar or believing what’s in the company’s letter when it’s the ONLY information we have gotten since September 13th. We deserve to know. That’s the union’s fault for the lack of transparency.”

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan workers should be warned that the sellout agreement signed off on by the UAW bureaucracy with the Detroit Three is exactly what is coming for their strike. It is critical that striking workers form a rank-and-file committee to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the UAW officials. Through a rank-and-file committee the anger and opposition of striking workers can be organized to unite the struggle at BCBSM with the autoworkers, striking casino workers and other sections of the working class for a mass struggle for improved wages, working conditions and benefits and in defense of jobs.



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