

800 Michigan nurses prepare for strike as Ascension leads the industry in cost cutting

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Close to 800 nurses at Ascension Genesys are planning to strike on May 24, citing mandatory overtime 16-hour shifts, unaffordable and poor employee health insurance and unsafe nurse-to-patient ratios. The nurses voted last month to strike by 98 percent.

The strike will take place at Genesys Hospital's main campus in Grand Blanc Township, Michigan as well as the nearby Genesys Hospital Cardiac Rehabilitation department and the Genesys-Hurley Cancer Institute in Flint.

Ascension is one of the country's largest health systems, with 139 hospitals and 40 senior living facilities across 19 states and DC. But after suffering significant losses in 2022 and 2023, Ascension has been making aggressive moves to sell off or close facilities.

In Michigan alone, Ascension has sold three Michigan hospitals to MyMichigan Health and is ceding management of eight acute care hospitals to Henry Ford Health, leaving Ascension—after both deals are completed—with only four remaining facilities in Michigan. Ascension Genesys is one of the hospitals slated to be taken over by Henry Ford.

Ascension workers have launched several strikes over the past year, including:

- A strike of physicians, Physician's Assistants and Nurse Practitioners at Ascension St. John in Detroit in April;

- Two strikes in 2023 of 800 nurses at Ascension Seton Medical Center in Austin, Texas;

- Two strikes in 2023 of more than 900 nurses at Ascension Via Christi St. Joseph and Ascension St.

Francis in Wichita, Kansas;

- Three strikes by 500 nurses at Ascension Saint Joseph in Joliet, Illinois between August 2023 and February 2024. In 2022 ER nurses were escorted off the premises by security after they refused to clock in for a shift where they would be severely understaffed. The next day over 100 nurses gathered to hold a vigil supporting these nurses, and;

- In September, nurses and radiology technologists went on strike at Ascension Providence Rochester outside Detroit.

As Ascension Genesys nurses prepare to strike, a major cyber attack has affected all Ascension facilities. The impact of the May 8 attack has caused a nationwide shutdown of electronic medical records, making the day-to-day work of nurses far more difficult, and prone to error. The cyber attack has also caused Ascension to close pharmacies, reschedule non-emergent procedures and divert ambulances.

The hospital's nursing union, Teamsters Local 332, has already caved to one of the hospital's demands to postpone the strike for four days in light of the cyber attack. In a May 13th letter to the nurses, local president Dan Glass said that the strike would be postponed for legal issues—the hospital claims the strike notice was not filed correctly—and “in light of the hospital's ongoing technology problems” arising from the cyber event.

In other words, instead of calling out nurses at a time when their strike would be most powerful, the union is allowing the hospital time to better prepare for the strike and to continue pushing the nurses to exhaustion as they fight to operate the hospital with the bare minimum amid the cyber attack.

The union bureaucracy is working to limit and isolate their struggle. The Teamsters officials played the same

role at UPS, where a supposed “historic” contract is now paving the way for hundreds of facility closures and tens of thousands of layoffs.

Management, in the meantime, is preparing to deal ruthlessly with the strike. One worker, who asked to remain anonymous, said that Ascension has hired scab nurses whom the company plans to pay upward of \$100 an hour, in addition to a housing and meal stipend. This same worker reported that other workers are supportive of the nurses’ strike, with Sysco delivery truck drivers declaring they will not be crossing the nurses’ picket line.

Ascension is one of the industry leaders in the for-profit attack on healthcare.

In 2013, fearing projected losses, Ascension laid off thousands of workers nationwide, including a large number of clinical staff. Meanwhile, executives at individual hospitals were given bonuses if they met their financial targets. The company boasted that these “Successful Labor Optimization Efforts” led to \$500 million in savings in three years.

In 2018, the company implemented another round of aggressive layoffs, including 500 employees in Michigan alone.

In 2022 and 2023, Ascension suffered operating losses of \$1.8 billion and \$3 billion, respectively. In response, Ascension began a major restructuring. The company increased outsourcing and began shutting down or selling off non-lucrative facilities.

Outsourcing is becoming more commonplace across the healthcare system, with Ascension leading the way in outsourcing clinical work. This carries significant risks, including an increase in medication errors and overall decrease in patient safety, worsening employee morale and higher costs for patients.

Ascension recently announced a new deal with private equity firm Schumacher Clinical Partners (SCP) to take over Ascension facilities across Illinois, requiring all hospital employees to reapply for their jobs. Ascension also outsourced its lab work to LabCorp in 2022 and uses private-equity-run staffing firms at all of its facilities to varying degrees.

Ascension claims that all of its aggressive cost-cutting measures from layoffs to outsourcing to investments allow the company to increase its “charitable care.” In reality, the company’s charity care rates have not increased and remain average

compared to other non-profits of a similar size. Further exposing this lie, Ascension has closed down or made major cutbacks recently at safety-net hospitals, hospitals designed to provide care for the under- and uninsured.

In other words, the terrible conditions nurses are striking against are a result of the fact that the healthcare system is totally subordinated to Wall Street and to the profit motive in general.

The nurses at Ascension Genesys are in a powerful position to fight and win their demands, but they must be prepared to fight not only Ascension but the corporate and financial oligarchy that stands behind them, as well as their agents in the trade union bureaucracy. They must broaden their struggle, appealing to support across the entire Ascension network and healthcare workers across the country, by forming networks of rank-and-file committees, independent of the bureaucracy, for the right of their patients to have access to safe and affordable care.



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