

Teamsters announce ratification of sellout contract for Ascension Genesys registered nurses

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Teamsters Local 332 officials announced Wednesday evening that the tentative agreement it reached with the management of Ascension Genesys hospital in Grand Blanc, Michigan had been ratified by the nursing staff. The union claimed 80 percent of those who voted approved the sellout deal. At least 100 out of 800 members abstained from the vote, according to rank-and-file workers.

The agreement will be valid for only one year as Henry Ford Health is set to take over the hospital as early as July as part of the \$10.5 billion joint venture with Ascension. After the takeover, nurses are not sure whether Henry Ford will continue to recognize the union local, if nurses will be subject to mass layoffs, or forced to reapply for their positions.

Nurses have expressed anxiety over the upcoming takeover. One nurse explained to WSWs reporters that she felt pressured to vote yes due to the uncertainty over the takeover. “Maybe if we voted no, Henry Ford comes in and they don’t have to recognize the union and fire everybody. We were pushed into saying yes for the contract.”

Teamsters officials have only given nurses empty assurances that the contract will be honored for the full year. At the same time, the union has not waged any fight to ensure job security for the nurses or prepare them for the coming transition. Instead, they delayed the strike at the request of management, then called it off with an announcement of a deal, which does not meet any of the nurses’ main demands.

Ascension Genesys nurses are aware that their fight is far from over. Now more than ever before, nurses need to form independent rank-and-file organizations to prepare for their defense in the upcoming management takeover. To fight against potential job cuts and further attacks on their working conditions, nurses must take the struggle out of the hands of the Teamsters bureaucracy. This is proven by the character of the deal itself.

Mandatory overtime was not eliminated by the union, allowing the hospital to force nurses to work 16-hour shifts, putting the lives of patients and nurses in danger. Just last month, a Massachusetts nurse, pushed to work to the point of exhaustion, accidentally drove off the roof of the parking

garage, breaking her arm and back.

The union also imposed sub-par wage increases, ordered by years of licensure. The lowest level, at 4.24 percent, does not keep up with inflation. The highest, 39.5 percent, serves to make up for years of pay lost to inflation rather than representing any real pay increase. A meager ratification bonus of \$3,000 will mostly be eaten by taxes.

There is nothing in the contract that addresses concrete staffing ratios or plans for enforcing those ratios. Instead, the Teamsters imposed a complicated and worthless plan for nurses to be paid bonuses if staffing reaches critical levels. These types of “critical staffing bonuses” are well known by nurses to be empty and unenforced.

The deal will further incorporate the union bureaucracy in the structure of hospital management. Article 42 in the highlights states that joint labor-management committees will meet every other month. These corporatist bodies, which are based on the lie that workers and management have the same interests, are used to slash costs and increase the exploitation of health care workers.

Several nurses and other hospital workers spoke with reporters from *World Socialist Web Site* about their conditions and the agreement.

“Our raises are \$8.28 for one year, but we still need to hit work conditions and nurse-to-patient ratios. We’re getting some compensation, but we don’t know how they figured this out. I was here before the union was here. We want to do our best for our patients without being abused.”

Another nurse expressed her frustration with the lack of information from the Teamsters before the contract vote. “When negotiations are going on you ask them, ‘What are you fighting for?’ They’re just like ‘We’re working on it.’ What are we paying for every month then?”

He went on to explain the “over-grid” language in the contract. Rather than prohibiting dangerously high patient-to-nurse ratios, the union agreed to scheme that would allow the hospital to pay out a little money to nurses when they violate the ratios. “The wording is very odd about over-grid if we have too many patients. It’s like tipping culture, you get so many

extra dollars an hour if you're over-grid. But you split it amongst your coworkers. How does that work? It's like a waitress in a restaurant."

Other workers throughout the hospital came to the defense of nurses against the conditions enforced by the Ascension management and Teamsters bureaucrats.

One housekeeping worker explained how the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened already poor working conditions. "The nurse per patient ratio is outrageous. Ever since COVID it has skyrocketed. I don't know how you can do adequate care and still feel good when you go home. It's driving nurses out of the field."

Denouncing the subordination of health care to corporate profit, she added, "I've seen this ever since I started here more than five years ago. I've seen it all with COVID. It's ridiculous how they've treated the nursing staff. They kept housekeeping out of the rooms. We stood outside the rooms handing things to the nurses who had to clean the rooms."

"Nurses are not happy," a dietary worker told the WSWs. Her coworker added, "We try to do our jobs. We bring patients food and if we have questions on their diet, the nurses have ten patients and can't get to us. Ten patients for one nurse is stupid. With the cyber attack [on Ascension's computer system] we can't look up to see a patient's diet and have to hope a nurse remembers."

The experiences over the last several years of railroad, auto, UPS, health care and other workers have underscored that the biggest obstacle to workers' efforts to improve their wages and working conditions has been the labor bureaucracy.

The Teamsters President Sean O'Brien, like United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain, was promoted by the media and pseudo-left supporters of the labor bureaucracy as a leader of "union reform." Instead, the Teamsters-backed contract at UPS opened the door for the closure of 200 facilities and destruction of the jobs of tens of thousands of jobs of warehouse and salaried workers.

Since last year there have been over 35 strikes by healthcare workers in the US over the same issues: understaffing, burnout, forced overtime and subordination of health care to private profit. This is part of a global upsurge of opposition, including the battle of nurses and midwives in Victoria, Australia. In each case, workers have been thrust into a struggle against the labor bureaucracies and capitalist governments, which uphold the for-profit health care system.

Ascension, the largest tax-exempt hospital system in the country, received \$1.8 billion in federal grants after the outbreak of the pandemic. This was part of the \$175 billion COVID bailout of hospital chains and health care systems by the Trump administration and both parties in Congress. The money has largely been used to fuel a massive wave of mergers and acquisitions, and with that an accelerating cost-cutting drive to boost profits and executive and investor payouts.

The Socialist Equality Party's candidate for US vice

president, Jerry White, stressed these issues in the Twitter/X comment he posted to support the Ascension Genesys nurses.

The essential issue that is behind the growing strike wave of healthcare workers in the United States and around the world is the subordination of health care to private profit. The Socialist Equality Party, in opposition to the Democrats and Republicans and their support for the profit-driven healthcare system and relentless squandering of resources, including \$1 trillion a year on war, says resources must be used to guarantee high quality healthcare to all. The healthcare system must be transformed into a socialist system collectively controlled and democratically run by workers themselves.

While Ascension reported it lost \$1.9 billion in revenue and pandemic expenses, the hospital chain has been sitting on a \$26 billion reserve in cash and investments. During the last quarter, Ascension reported a revenue increase of 6.2 percent compared to last year, to \$7.37 billion. While wages and benefits continue to decrease, exacerbated by inflation, Ascension bonds are rated "AA" by Fitch Ratings, signaling a favorable investment.

This rating will be bolstered by the pro-company agreement and joint venture with Henry Ford Health. This is not, as advertised, a "partnership" for better patient care, but a profit-making scheme that is predicated on the greater exploitation of healthcare workers.

To prepare for the future struggles, Ascension Genesys nurses require a new political perspective and the organizational forms to unite with healthcare workers across hospitals, states and countries to launch an industrial and political counter-offensive to take profit out of medicine.

The *World Socialist Web Site* Healthcare Worker Newsletter calls on Ascension nurses who agree with this perspective to fill out the form below to build a rank-and-file committee at your workplace.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact