

Why are Michigan Medicine unions telling workers to cross SEIU picket lines?

Kevin Reed**13 October 2024**

On the eve of a one-day strike by members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) at Michigan Medicine, thousands of hospital employees who belong to other unions at the healthcare system of the University of Michigan are being told to cross the SEIU picket lines and report to work.

On Tuesday, 2,700 workers—respiratory therapists, ECMO (extracorporeal membrane oxygenation) specialists, phlebotomists, patient care technicians, inpatient unit clerks and clerical staff—are scheduled to walk off the job in a one-day strike to win their first-ever contract.

The workers are demanding restoration of retirement benefits that were taken away by Michigan Medicine at the beginning of the pandemic and for increases in wages and improved working conditions. Some of the SEIU members are being paid less than \$20 per hour and must contribute a large percentage of their income to healthcare benefits and parking expenses.

Although there are at least 12,000 employees that belong to other unions at Michigan Medicine, these workers—nurses, physician assistants, interns, residents and post-doctoral fellows, and technical workers—are being told by union officials to cross the picket line on Tuesday and report to work.

On Friday, for example, the leadership of the University of Michigan Professional Nurse Council (UMPNC) published a statement on its website and social media accounts that told the 6,000 member nurses that the union was “deeply troubled” that hospital management had “walked away from a good faith agreement they made with SEIU Wednesday night.”

The UMPNC leadership then went on to make phony statements about “unity” and how they “will not stand by as our colleagues are denied the respect, dignity, and equity they deserve.” However, the nurses’ union told workers “to wear purple and to join them on their strike line before and after your shift.”

Justifying its instructions to nurses to cross the picket line and effectively scab on their fellow workers, the UMPNC

claimed, “Secondary or solidarity strikes are not allowed under state and federal labor law.” The nurses’ union furthermore attempted to turn its scabbing orders into a matter of personal choice once nurses are on the job: “[We] ask that each nurse search their conscience and consider the ramifications prior to picking up additional hours during that 24-hour period.”

Similarly, the House Officers Association (HOA), which represents doctors in training at Michigan Medicine, told its members to “show up in support of our striking colleagues in SEIU by going to their pickets.” Then the union said “support” should take the form of picketing during “personal time,” and added, “Please note: The HOA is not striking or calling a strike; all House Officers should report to work and fully perform their duties.”

The Union of Michigan Medicine Allied Professionals (UMMAP), which represents technicians who are also fighting for their first contract over similar issues, told its members that the local executive board “supports our sibling union in exercising their moral right and imperative to organize a work stoppage to secure fair and just compensation.” However, the union said UMAP members “will not be on strike next Tuesday. Do not leave your job to join the picket line.”

Finally, the leadership of the United Physician Assistants of Michigan Medicine (UPAMM) has so far not issued a public statement regarding the SEIU one-day strike. This union is also in contract negotiations.

The isolation of the one-day strike by SEIU members is predictable given the fact that all the unions at Michigan Medicine have worked systematically to prevent a unified struggle by the entire workforce against the healthcare system operated by the University of Michigan, the fourth largest hospital chain in the state. They conveniently cite reactionary anti-strike laws to justify their inaction, but they have created this loophole for themselves by keeping workers on contracts with different expiration dates or isolating the negotiations for initial contracts.

The growing anger and willingness of Michigan Medicine

workers to take up a fight against hospital management—the members of SEIU voted by 98 percent to authorize strike action—is part of an expanding movement of workers in all industries and occupations in the US and around the world against decades of attacks on wages, benefits and working conditions by employers and governments.

These healthcare workers are fighting the corporate and financial interests that control the healthcare industry and run it on a capitalist basis. Michigan Medicine, ostensibly a public and non-profit healthcare system, is managed by the University of Michigan Board of Regents, a body that is made up of Democratic Party officials and corporate and legal representatives of the capitalist system.

While workers are facing understaffing, overwork and burnout and have watched their incomes fall drastically behind the rate of inflation, millionaires and billionaires connected with for-profit enterprises doing business with the University of Michigan healthcare system are benefiting financially from the exploitation of the workforce.

Additionally, the demand from the Michigan Medicine union leaders that hospital workers cross the picket lines of the SEIU members shows that the fight is also against the union apparatus, which is tied to the hospital administration and Board of Regents through innumerable political and economic connections.

Three of the unions at Michigan Medicine—UMMAP, UPAMM and HOA—are affiliates of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), a union that has deep ties to the Biden administration and the campaign of Democrat Kamala Harris for US president in 2024. The AFT is doing everything in its power to keep a hospital-wide walkout at Michigan Medicine from erupting before the November election, which would undermine the phony pretense that the pro-corporate and pro-war Harris is a friend of the working class.

Meanwhile, Michigan Medicine workers have told the *World Socialist Web Site* that they are fed up with the lack of information coming from their unions about the contract negotiations that have been underway since January. For example, a visit to the bargaining page of UMAP shows that the union leadership has not shared anything new with its members since June 7. The website of UPAMM, where workers have been without a contract since June 2, has no bargaining information except an announcement saying, “October 2024: No Contract agreement reached.”

The calling of a one-day strike by the SEIU—assuming that it is not called off at the last minute by the union leadership—is a stunt aimed at giving the appearance of doing something while, in fact, preventing the type of hospital-wide workforce mobilization that is required to win the

demands of workers. The SEIU has published a statement on its website that says the union is “all in for Kamala Harris!”

To win their demands, rank-and-file Michigan Medicine workers need to break free of the pro-Democratic Party and pro-capitalist politics of the union bureaucracy and form independent committees that will place the conduct of their contract fight into the hands of the workers themselves. A strike deadline must be set by workers with no contract and preparations made for all-out strike action to shut down the hospital by getting all workers to honor the picket lines.

A negotiating committee must be elected democratically by the rank and file to take the conduct of the negotiations out of the hands of the union apparatus. Details of the negotiations with hospital management must be made public and shared with the entire workforce and the university community.

A rank-and-file committee must begin with what is needed by the workforce, not with what Michigan Medicine—the most cash-rich hospital system in the state—says it can afford. This fight must be rooted in the understanding that Michigan Medicine workers are fighting to remove profit from healthcare, which must be provided to the public based on need and not on how much money it makes for the billionaire elite.

This means mounting an offensive against the capitalist system and the alliance of the unions with the Democratic Party. The rank-and-file committee must also unite all Michigan Medicine workers with other sections of workers at the university and throughout the working class—such as the transport and airline industry, the auto industry and the tech industry—in a unified struggle for socialism.



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