

Detroit-area Corewell Health nurses vote to unionize with the Teamsters

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A majority of nearly 10,000 nurses who work for Corewell Health in the Detroit area voted on November 15 to be represented by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

Among 9,775 Corewell Health nurses from nine hospitals in Southeastern Michigan, 4,958 voted in favor of unionizing with the Teamsters and 2,957 voted against it, according to figures made public by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB).

Those eligible to vote included full-time and regular part-time registered nurses, including casual, contingent, flex and charge nurses. The new union will represent staff at the Corewell facilities in Dearborn, Farmington Hills, Grosse Pointe, Royal Oak, Taylor, Trenton, Troy and Wayne, Michigan.

A statement from the NLRB said the nurses' petition to unionize was one of the largest in recent history. Throughout the NLRB vote, Corewell Health mounted an organized campaign for a "no" vote, including the formation of a Facebook group called Corewell Health Nurses Against Teamsters.

The vote is a clear sign that nurses are determined to organize to demand improved wages and benefits and an end to staffing shortages, mandatory overtime and burnout. Conditions at Corewell, the second largest hospital system in the state, have deteriorated throughout the coronavirus pandemic and current wages and benefits have forced them to do more with less.

As Rebecca Smola, an RN at a Corewell facility in Dearborn told FOX 2 Detroit, the sacrifices that nurses made throughout the COVID-19 crisis, including putting their own families at risk, have not been recognized or led to any improvements. Smola said, "Some things have gotten worse and that was kind of the time when I felt a union was appropriate."

Corewell Health, the merged product of a Beaumont Health and Spectrum Health, is Michigan's second-largest hospital system. It operates 21 hospitals in Michigan, out of which it recorded \$157.8 million in net operating income on \$13.8 billion in revenue in 2022. The Beaumont-Spectrum merger has been enormously lucrative for hospital executives, including outgoing Beaumont Health CEO John Fox, who was paid \$10.2 million, and new CEO Tina Freese Decker, formerly of Spectrum Health, who made \$4.5 million in 2022.

The profit-driven attack on health care is a universal issue, which has sparked a growing movement of nurses and other health care workers cross the world. In the United States, nurses have been at the forefront of the strike wave over the past four years.

The fight nurses want to conduct requires unity, not just across the entire Corewell system but across the US and the world. Behind the major hospital chains is finance capital, which is directing massive attacks, including layoffs, in industries across the world.

It also requires that nurses begin, not from what Corewell management claims it can afford, but what they and the public urgently require. Nurses must connect a fight for higher wages and better staffing ratios with the defense of access to public health as a basic social right.

And the fight must be democratically controlled by nurses themselves, with decision-making embracing the entire membership, with the will of the majority binding upon all.

But such a fight can only be waged through a struggle of the rank-and-file against the Teamsters bureaucracy. While nurses voted for the union because they want unity, the bureaucracy is concerned solely with establishing corrupt relations with management of the

type it enjoys around the country.

If management, on the other hand, digs in its heels, experience shows that rather than calling a strike to force the company to accept the demands of nurses, the bureaucrats will drag out talks for years, resulting in a contract favorable to management.

This means that nurses must form rank-and-file committees, independent of Teamsters officials, to insist on the principle that the will of the workers take absolute priority, and to fight to transfer power from the unaccountable bureaucrats to the shop floor.

Workers already in the Teamsters have been organizing rank-and-file committees for years, including on the railroads, when officials in the Teamsters and other unions refused to call a railroad strike, giving the government time to ban it and impose a contract.

Last year, UPS workers organized a rank-and-file committee to fight against a new contract which the Teamsters announced after violating their pledge to call a national strike. The union bureaucracy pushed the deal through on the basis of lies, and it is now being used to slash tens of thousands of jobs. UPS management itself says the contract's "labor certainty" is key to its plan to close or automate 200 facilities.

Elsewhere in the Michigan healthcare industry, the Teamsters sold out 800 nurses at Ascension Genesys in Grand Rapids, Michigan, canceling a strike and pushing through a contract that gave management everything it wanted.

These betrayals are not limited to the Teamsters, but are a common feature of the bureaucracies in charge of every union. The bureaucrats accept the capitalist profit system, and their social interests depend on helping enforce "labor peace" to allow them to enjoy their six figure salaries and cozy relations with management and the corporate parties.

Earlier this month, the unions at Michigan Medicine called off a strike at the last second, and a strike by healthcare workers at the University of California was limited to two days, resolving nothing. At west coast hospital chain Kaiser Permanente, the unions receive tens of millions in corporate funding through the "Labor Management Partnership"—similar schemes exist elsewhere.

And in the auto industry, the United Auto Workers officials are holding workers back while the companies

slash thousands of jobs in Detroit and hundreds of thousands worldwide.

The bureaucracy has close ties to the corporate parties, and Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien is a Trump supporter who spoke at the Republican National Convention. In supporting Trump, the Teamsters union administration is responsible for the massive attacks on healthcare coming with the new administration under the anti-vax Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.

The next step for nurses is the development of a network of rank-and-file committees at Corewell Health, connecting the defense of public healthcare with a fight against the sellouts of the union apparatus.

A committee would demand real control by nurses over contract talks, with no backroom discussions, hidden side letters, et cetera. It would mobilize nurses to fight for a contract which meets all of their demands, including inflation-busting pay raises and better staffing ratios.

If Corewell refuses to accept their demands, nurses should demand strike action, rather than endless talks. Such a strike should embrace the entire Corewell system, with adequate provisioning for strike pay through Teamsters assets which are paid for with workers' dues money.

Above all, a rank-and-file committee would appeal for support across the whole working class for Corewell nurses, including their colleagues at Michigan Medicine, autoworkers and others. Through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which embraces other committees across the world, nurses could establish lines of contact and plan a common strategy, mobilizing the strength of the working class independent of the corporate parties and the sellout bureaucrats.



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