

Henry Ford Genesys Hospital nurses remain determined as strike enters second month

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As the determined strike by 700 nurses and case workers at Henry Ford Genesys Hospital in Grand Blanc, Michigan, enters its fifth week, the healthcare corporation has escalated its strikebreaking campaign.

In a provocative move, management ordered the striking workers to dismantle their picket line encampments, while the Teamsters union bureaucracy has openly sided with the company, telling the strikers that there is nothing that can be done about it.

The nurses, who have been on strike since Labor Day, are fighting against intolerable working conditions. Their key demand is the implementation of safe, mandatory nurse-to-patient ratios. Their struggle has exposed the reality of the US healthcare system, where patient care is systematically sacrificed for corporate profits.

Tensions on the picket line flared this week after Henry Ford management demanded the removal of tents, burn barrels, and chairs that have provided striking nurses with minimal shelter from the elements. The hospital also ordered the nurses to park in a more distant lot and confined their picketing to a narrow four-foot strip of grass next to a busy road. The company cynically claimed these measures were necessary due to “public safety concerns.”

The striking nurses, however, see the move for what it is: a desperate act of retaliation. One nurse explained, “They are feeling pressure from the community, and they don’t like that. They have some fear in them, that we are stronger than what they first anticipated. They think they misjudged us, and this is their move to retaliate, to try to scare us.”

The leadership of Teamsters Local 332 immediately buckled to the hospital’s demands. In a video message sent to striking nurses, Local 332 President Dan Glass declared that Henry Ford was “right” and that the hospital “had their lawyers on it,” ordering his members to comply with the directive.

The response on the picket line revealed a growing chasm between the determination of the rank-and-file and the pro-company orientation of the union apparatus. Upon hearing Glass’s message, one nurse responded with an exasperated, “What about our lawyers?” Her comment was met with laughter from other nurses, a clear sign that trust in the union leadership is rapidly breaking down.

This climb down is not an isolated incident but part of the strategy of the Teamsters union apparatus to isolate the strike and strangle it. While Henry Ford claims it has a “handshake agreement” with the Teamsters to remove the picket-line infrastructure, it is clear this agreement was made over the heads of the striking nurses, who remain defiant. As one nurse affirmed, “We’re still going to stand strong out here. You can take every tent, chair, whatever it may be. We’re still out here fighting for the community.”

A struggle against the corporate demolition of healthcare

Interviews with striking nurses paint a picture of a healthcare system in a state of advanced collapse, systematically dismantled in the interest of private profit. The nurses’ struggle is not primarily about wages, but a fight to defend their patients and their ability to provide the quality care they were trained for.

Jane, a nurse with 27 years of experience at the hospital, traced its decline. “When the hospital was first built as Genesys, I loved working here, was proud,” she said. But after being taken over first by Ascension and then by Henry Ford Health last October, the situation has become unbearable. “Henry Ford... is terrible. They do not care about the patients; it’s entirely about money,” she stated.

The central issue is the dangerously high patient loads imposed on the nursing staff. Multiple nurses described being forced to care for 10 or 11 patients at a time on floors where the safe ratio is four or five to one nurse.

Another key issue is protection of existing contractual rights, which Henry Ford management is seeking to scrap in the aftermath of its acquisition of the hospital in 2024. Henry Ford Health acquired the Grand Blanc Genesys Hospital through a joint venture with Ascension Michigan.

The Genesys nurses are not fighting alone. Their struggle is part of a broader fight against the escalating attacks on the right to quality healthcare. On September 30 the contract expired for 62,000 Kaiser Permanente healthcare workers in California, Hawaii, Oregon and Washington state. Among their key demands are safe staffing ratios.

Madeline, a nurse of 19 years, works on a medical-surgical floor that also treats oncology patients receiving chemotherapy. “We on our floor should have four to one, and we’re 11-1,” she explained. “Where we should have less than four patients. This is very time-consuming, and you can’t do that. You’re forced to choose, and we’re dealing with human lives. You can either hold somebody’s hand as they’re dying or pass a pain med. We all have a lot of shame and guilt from not being able to take care of people properly.”

Under these conditions, basic nursing care has become impossible. Nurses may only get to see a patient for three minutes during a shift. They fall so far behind that they might be passing morning medications when their shift is supposed to end. When worried family members approach the nurses’ station for an update, the nurses are often forced to admit, “I’m sorry, I have not seen your loved one” or that they know nothing about the patient they are supposed to be caring for.

The crisis extends beyond staffing ratios to a chronic and deliberate lack of basic supplies and equipment. Madeline detailed how the hospital refuses to provide adult briefs and frequently runs out of wipes for patients. “We’re forced to use washcloths, which are super rough on the skin. These people have breakdown and sores, and then we’re using this on their skin,” she said.

The situation has become so dire that family members are forced to bring in their own wipes and briefs for their loved ones, an embarrassing and degrading reality for the dedicated nursing staff.

Essential medical equipment is also in a state of disrepair. Computers on wheels used to scan and verify medications are “always broken,” creating enormous risks for patient safety.

The staff shortages are hospital-wide, forcing nurses to take on numerous other roles. “We’re not only doing our nursing job, but everybody in the hospital is short, so we also are catering, we’re transporting people, we’re nurse aides,” one nurse explained. There is no support from management, who are never on the floor helping and instead blame the frontline staff for the systemic failures.

Many nurses had hoped that the takeover by the larger Henry Ford Health system would bring more resources and staff. Instead, the opposite occurred. “That didn’t happen at all,” Madeline stated bluntly.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for management to intensify its exploitation. The ruling class saw how nurses and other healthcare workers sacrificed during the pandemic, working understaffed and without proper equipment, and decided to make those crisis conditions the new normal.

One nurse, Louisa, explained, “Management saw what we did during COVID... and expected us to continue doing exactly that. They let conditions stay bad, concluding, ‘Oh, they can do it like that. So, let’s just continue’.”

This has led to immense burnout and trauma, driving scores of experienced nurses out of the profession, which in turn exacerbates the staffing crisis. “It’s hard to retain people when we’re short-staffed,” a nurse said. “People come in to train with us, and they see the conditions that we’re in, and I think they question themselves if they want to be in that profession.”

Henry Ford’s lies and hypocrisy

In its public statements, Henry Ford Health has resorted to slanders and lies to discredit the striking nurses. The corporation claims the current contract dispute is not about ratios, but about eliminating “premium pay” provisions that, it alleges, “incentivizes coordinated call-offs.”

Nurses are not engaged in a scheme to get premium pay. They are calling off because they are physically and mentally exhausted and their requests for vacation time are systematically denied due to the chronic understaffing that the hospital itself has created.

Furthermore, they are subjected to mandated overtime every shift. An eight-hour shift becomes 12, and a 12-hour shift becomes 16. Refusing mandatory overtime three times results in disciplinary action. “What if you have family?” one nurse asked. “Doesn’t matter, they don’t care.”

While attacking its dedicated staff, the hospital pleads poverty, projecting a “\$50 million loss this year” after a decade of purported “financial challenges.” This claim is rendered absurd by the fact that Henry Ford is spending a fortune on travel nurses to break the strike. These temporary nurses are being paid double what the striking nurses make, and are also provided with housing, food, and other amenities. “They got the red carpet pulled out for them,” one nurse noted with disgust.

This exposes the corporation’s real priorities. There is no money to ensure safe staffing for the community, but there are unlimited funds for strikebreaking. The issue is not a lack of resources, but the subordination of every aspect of healthcare to the profit motive.

As one nurse, Louisa, observed, “The whole philosophy behind nursing and healthcare has been lost. It has just become about profits and how much they can make, skimming off what is really needed to deliver quality care because they want to make more money themselves.”

The class divide between the nurses, and the healthcare corporate

executives could not be starker. An experienced nurse named Jenny said, “The CEOs, they don’t even know what it is to do our jobs. They don’t know healthcare. All they know is the business end of it... Come and walk a day in our shoes.”

A growing determination and political consciousness

Despite the attacks from the corporation and the betrayals of the union bureaucracy, the striking nurses remain unbowed. “We are not going back in there without a contract. That’s the feeling of many people,” one striker declared.

Their commitment to the community they serve was demonstrated during the recent tragic mass church shooting that took place less than two miles from the picket line. Upon hearing the news, a group of striking emergency room nurses immediately ran back into the hospital to help treat the victims.

While distraught staff inside initially welcomed them, upper administration officials appeared minutes later and ordered the striking nurses to “get out.” This incident starkly reveals the class interests at play: the nurses, who instinctively act to save lives, versus the corporate administration, which is guided by callous legal and financial calculations.

The strike has won considerable support from the community. A former state worker named Bob, soon to be 80 years old, had come to walk the picket line with the strikers. A patient with a cardiologist appointment, he refused to cross the picket line to see his doctor. “It is about money,” Bob said of the hospital’s position. “They have more money than the nurses and they are going to wait as long as they can until it really hurts them.”

The lengthy strike is forcing a deeper political discussion among the workers. On the picket line, conversations have moved from the immediate issues to the broader attacks on public health and the financialization of the entire healthcare industry. Nurses eagerly took copies of articles from the *World Socialist Web Site* analyzing the role of private equity in healthcare.

When asked about the need to unite with other healthcare workers across the country, Louisa responded, “I do think we need to unite under extreme situations like this. Since the hospitals and care facilities are feeling the same ‘pinch’ nationwide, maybe something has to be done. It’s time to act.”

The way forward

The strike at Henry Ford Genesys is at a critical turning point. The nurses have demonstrated immense courage and solidarity. However, their struggle is being systematically sabotaged by the Teamsters bureaucracy, which is working hand-in-glove with the corporation to isolate and wear down the strike.

The instruction by Dan Glass for nurses to comply with the company’s strikebreaking demands is an unmistakable sign that the union apparatus is preparing a sellout contract that will resolve none of the fundamental issues of staffing and working conditions.

To prevent this betrayal, striking nurses must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. This requires the formation of a rank-and-file strike committee, democratically controlled by the nurses themselves and independent of the pro-corporate Teamsters officials.

Such a committee would break the isolation imposed by the bureaucracy and launch a powerful counter-offensive. It would formulate its own non-

negotiable demands, starting with firm, mandatory nurse-to-patient ratios, and a fight to expand the strike by appealing for support from other Henry Ford workers and healthcare workers throughout Michigan and across the country.

The fight at Henry Ford Genesys is the same fight being waged by nurses and healthcare workers everywhere against the subordination of human life to private profit. This struggle must be connected to the broader movement of the working class, including the 150,000 autoworkers whose UAW leadership has also worked with the Big Three auto corporations and negotiated a sellout contract.

The fight for healthcare as a social right, not a source of corporate wealth, requires a political struggle by the entire working class against the capitalist system for a socialist program that places the hospital chains and pharmaceutical corporations under public ownership and democratic control, to be run for human need and not private profit.



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