

Madison, Wisconsin nurses facing harassment over unionization effort after hospital calls union pin "Equivalent to a KKK Pin"

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Nurses at SSM Health St. Mary's Hospital in Madison, Wisconsin filed paperwork with the National Labor Relations Board to request a union election. Referring to themselves as St. Mary's & Dean Nurses United, the group stated that 70 percent of nurses signed union authorization cards. They are seeking to join the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Wisconsin local. The new union would represent eight hundred and seventy nurses.

A central issue that motivated nurses was their unmet demands for safe staffing levels. They also cite inadequate workplace security and wages that have failed to keep pace with the cost of living as key concerns behind the organizing drive.

Hanna Mason, a nurse at SSM St. Mary's, said in a letter addressed to St. Mary's nurses: "Since I started at St. Mary's 5 years ago, benefits have declined and conditions have worsened due to unsafe staffing and added responsibilities without fair pay. New nurses face constant turnover and are pushed to change roles before they're ready. Unsafe situations feel expected."

The response of SSM St. Mary's management response was thoroughly anti-democratic, attempting to intimidate workers for exercising their right to organize. In an email sent just 10 days after the filing, SSM Health Human Resources declared that wearing SEIU union buttons and badge reels "intentionally wastes work time."

Breanna Rhinesmith, a nurse at St. Mary's for two years, told the Cap Times: "We were told 'You will be suspended without pay and sent home today until you agree to comply'" in removing the union memorabilia.

A human resources manager told Kelsey Mueller, a nurse at St. Mary's Hospital of nine years, that wearing

a union pin was the political equivalent of wearing a Ku Klux Klan pin.

Mueller told *Common Good News*: "I chose to take off my pin and stay for the day and work because I care about my patients, but the comparison of a hate group to our unionization was extremely, extremely hurtful, because we as nurses, we're doing this for love. We love our patients. We're doing this because we care."

The drive at SSM Health St. Mary's takes place against the backdrop of an acute and worsening crisis in American nursing. The International Council of Nurses (ICN), the global federation representing nursing organizations in more than 100 countries, has described conditions facing nurses worldwide as a "global health emergency." In the United States, the nursing shortage is already at its worst in four decades, with up to 900,000 nurses expected to leave the workforce by 2027.

This exodus is driven in large part by burnout over being chronically forced to care for too many patients with too little support, unable to provide the standard of care they were trained to give. The consequences for patients are also severe when nurses are stretched too thin: warning signs go unnoticed, medications are delayed, and errors occur that would not occur on an adequately staffed ward.

Opposition is growing. Last year, 950 nurses at UnityPoint Health-Meriter Hospital, just across town, launched the first-ever strike in that hospital's history, walking out for five days over the same core demands now driving the St. Mary's drive. In November 2025, over 600 physicians and advanced practice providers at Allina Health in Minneapolis-St. Paul staged a strike after more than two years without a contract.

The SSM nurses' decision to campaign for a union expresses the instinctive understanding that their struggle requires organization and unity. But if they succeed in bringing in the union, they will be confronted with the need to fight against the pro-corporate bureaucracy which runs the union. The SEIU's record has been one of isolating and betraying workers' struggles rather than extending and empowering them.

During the Meriter strike last year, the SEIU called only a five-day walkout, declined to publish specific demands publicly, and actively blocked a strike by nursing home caregivers in Connecticut that could have been linked to the Wisconsin fight—preferring contained, time-limited actions instead.

Last year, the president of the SEIU's major healthcare division was ousted following a corruption scandal. As the *WSWS* wrote, the scandal:

...lifts the lid on how the union bureaucracy as a whole lives — its corrupt appetites, its essentially parasitic and hostile relationship to the workers they claim to represent, and their deep ties to management and the capitalist parties.

The pattern runs across unions around the country. In Minneapolis, the Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA) confined a 2022 walkout of 15,000 nurses across the Twin Cities and Duluth to three days and then sent nurses back without a contract. In 2016, nurses struck for weeks at Allina Health, only to have the MNA force through a concessions contract nearly identical to proposals workers had already rejected four times.

This year, the New York State Nurses Association shut down a 41-day New York City nurses' strike hospital by hospital, and UNAC/UHCP ended a 31,000-worker strike at Kaiser Permanente without a contract.

Whatever the outcome of the vote, SSM nurses face the need for independent organizations which they control. This means forming an independent rank-and-file committee — a democratically-elected body controlled by the nurses themselves, operating free

from the pressures of hospital management and the betrayals of the union bureaucracy.



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