

Hundreds of Michigan Medicine workers demand new contract

Our reporters
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Hundreds of Michigan Medicine workers participated in an informational picket outside the massive hospital complex in Ann Arbor on Monday morning. The physician assistants, medical technicians, respiratory therapists, patient service staff and other hospital workers are demanding a new contract with substantial wage and benefit improvements, along with safe staffing levels.

Officials from the Medicine Allied Professionals (UMMAP), United Physician Assistants of Michigan Medicine (UPAMM) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) say the University of Michigan Board of Regents, which oversees Michigan Medicine, has engaged in a “nine-month filibuster” during contract negotiations covering 7,100 union members.

Despite this, the unions have not set a strike deadline or even called for a strike authorization vote against Michigan Medicine, which covers the Ann Arbor-based healthcare system and reported \$226.5 million in operating profits for the last fiscal year ending June 30. Instead, the union officials have limited workers to an impotent letter writing campaign to the UM Regents requesting “fair compensation” and an informational picket after work hours.

Pickets, however, were in a militant mood, and there was widespread support for a strike. They held homemade signs expressing their anger over poverty-level wages, with slogans like “Underpaid and Overworked,” “We don’t want praise, we want a raise,” “Running vents [ventilators] for cents” and “Make the world aware that MI Medicine don’t pay fair.”

“I work in healthcare and cannot afford my own healthcare,” a patient care worker told reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*, adding that she had to pay \$1,100 per month for health insurance. The worker also had heard about the case of victimized Vanderbilt nurse RaDonda Vaught and commented, “You know, it’s the same situation here. We’re short-staffed and always afraid we’ll make a mistake and then be blamed for it.”

A respiratory therapist said, “Working here when the pandemic first hit was so scary. So many people got sick, and so many have left. We are severely understaffed because so many RTs quit to get better pay and fewer patients.” Another patient services worker added, “Job security is the biggest issue. They can hire and fire anyone they want for any reason, so that is my biggest concern.”

A medical tech, who had just finished a 12-hour shift, told the WSWS, “Pay is the most important issue. People are making different wages for doing the same thing. We love nurses, but there is a huge pay discrepancy between them and us. We do specialized work too. Nurses get a shift diff [differential] but we don’t. I think my time on midnights is worth the same as theirs.”

The Michigan Medicine Center in Ann Arbor employs over 25,000 workers, including 6,000 nurses and 7,100 technicians, physician assistants and other hospital staff workers, including those making as little as \$15.75 an hour. Facing a cauldron of opposition, exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic, UM officials decided to recognize the SEIU and the two American Federation of Teachers-affiliated unions UPAMM and UMMAP as “bargaining agents” over the last two years.

The Socialist Equality Party’s candidate for US vice president, Jerry White, visited the picket line and

marched with protesting Michigan Medicine workers. In discussions with workers, he explained that both parties provided billions in federal COVID-19 relief funding to giant hospital chains like Michigan Medicine. Now, they were carrying out a wave of mergers and acquisitions to slash thousands of jobs and boost profits.

“They called you ‘heroes’ when they were sending you into the infected hospitals now, they are cutting jobs and imposing intolerable workloads, further imperiling the safety of workers and patients alike even as the pandemic rages on,” he said. White said the union bureaucracies were tied to the Democratic Party, which defended the for-profit medical system and the savage exploitation of healthcare workers. SEP candidate Joseph Kishore and he, White said, were fighting for a socialist system of medicine to guarantee free, high quality healthcare to all, and good wages and conditions to health care workers.

As White spoke to a group of workers, several union reps attempted to frighten workers off by claiming the SEP candidate and his party were “union busters.” White explained to workers that SEP and its predecessor, the Workers League, had a decades-long history of defending the democratic rights of workers, including the right to join a union. White said he had personally attended the September 1981 mass demonstration against Reagan’s firing of the air traffic controllers where the Workers League called for a general strike to defeat the Republican president’s unionbusting.

But the AFL-CIO bureaucracy opposed a general strike, and this betrayal paved the way for more than four decades of social counter-revolution against the social and democratic rights of the working class. During this time, White said, the union apparatus was incorporated into the structure of corporate management and the capitalist government and has served as a labor police force to impose its demands. The union bureaucrats and their supporters, he said, denounce anyone, including rank-and-file workers, as “anti-union” if they criticize their sellout policies.

White said the SEP is calling for workers to build rank-and-file committees to transfer power from the union apparatus to the workers on the hospital floor. In opposition to the union bureaucrats’ support for the warmongering Democratic Party, White said, the SEP

was fighting to build a politically independent movement of the working class to oppose war, fascism and inequality.

White also recorded a social media video calling on workers in the US and around the world to support the fight of the Michigan Medicine workers.

The SEP candidate was warmly received by rank-and-file workers who took hundreds of copies of White’s statement to Michigan Medicine workers, titled, “Healthcare workers must fight to take profit out of medicine.”

“I’m very happy to hear there’s a socialist candidate running,” one healthcare worker told the WSWS. “I feel we need a change. The Democrats and Republicans are like trying to choose between two different types of rotten fish.”

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