

As working class upsurge grows, Michigan Medicine workers vote on strike action

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More than 7,000 Michigan Medicine workers are in a fight against the hospital and the University of Michigan administration for a new contract. Workers under three unions—the Union of Michigan Medicine Allied Professionals (UMMAP), Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the United Physician Assistants of Michigan Medicine (UPAMM)—are either currently voting or will be voting later this week for strike authorization.

Hospital workers are demanding increases in pay, benefits, improved staffing ratios and the end to wage compressions.

The struggle by Michigan Medicine workers is part of a global upsurge of the working class. On the West Coast, from Washington to California, 33,000 Boeing workers have been on strike for the last two weeks. Workers in nearby Jackson, Michigan at the Eaton Aerospace plant, a major supplier of parts to Boeing, have been on strike since September 16.

Healthcare workers internationally have been pushed into struggle. In Australia, more than 10,000 nurses and midwives are on strike against the Labor government's nominal pay increases which are far below inflation. Over 90,000 nurses in the National Health Service in England voted down the 5.5 percent wage award by the Labour government.

One UMMAP worker told the WSWS, “We’re voting for the strike, we need 90 percent of 3000 or 4500. Our [strike authorization] vote isn’t until after the SEIU’s, but we have a lot of support for a strike.”

The worker also called attention to the fact that all three unions cover workers in dozens and dozens of departments, positions the hospital would not be able to cover with scab labor. “They can’t run the ER, or the imaging, or the labs. They can’t run the hospital [without us].”

A worker under the SEIU stated, “I voted for the strike. There’s a lot of support. I think people who are not able to vote are calling people to support us.”

A medical assistant spoke about not being able to live off her current wages. She connected this to workers in other industries and stated that she hoped their struggle at Michigan Medicine inspired other workers to strike.

She described the difficulties she faces as an immigrant. “What’s the issue with Haitian immigrants?” referring to Trump’s incitement against refugees in Springfield, Ohio. “They came here a long time ago. This country doesn’t belong to anyone. We’re all immigrants! Both parties have their problems.

“I’m from a country that was under attack during the Jimmy Carter and Reagan administrations ... Then when people try to become citizens here you pay for so many interviews, permits, then different statuses for thousands of dollars. It’s all politics and money. That’s all they want.”

Reviewing a recent statement by the Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee for a united movement, she responded, “There has to be [unity]. Look at what’s happening in Gaza. I came from a country that was like that. Israel is committing a genocide!”

Another worker stated, “We need to strike. We know management doesn’t want to give us anything. I’ve been listening to the union meetings and it’s like a pep rally. We have real concerns. We want to make sure our benefits are maintained and that we receive a real raise in wages.

“This is the most advanced hospital in the area and they should pay their workers living wages. You have people like Bernstein and Ilitch [members of the University Board of Regents] that do everything to stifle us. Why are they in there? They don’t have

anything to do with medicine.

“With newer workers they raised the bottom but offset that by not raising the seniority workers. They want to get rid of seniority. Michigan Medicine could take away health insurance if they fire people. I hate to think it but they’re the enemy and it’s common everywhere. The world is exploited and it’s capitalism like you said. All the regents are in it together regardless of which party they support.”

The worker spoke of his concerns about a new world war. “I saw what happened in Lebanon, that’s insanity with the pagers. If they can do that there, they can do that to workers here.”

Workers at Michigan Medicine, like their brothers and sisters at Boeing, are in a two-front war against management and the trade union bureaucracies alike. UMMAP and UPAMM are both affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The AFT is giving its full backing to Biden’s “ironclad” defense of the Israeli genocide and to record US military spending, as well as escalating war against Russia in Ukraine and war preparations against China and Iran.

Randi Weingarten, president of the AFT, and the trade union bureaucracy as a whole are enlisting in the government drive to impose austerity on workers at home and suppress working class opposition to the war policy of US imperialism.

The AFT and the SEIU will do whatever they can to limit or stop a strike. Workers must not settle for separate or limited strikes. Workers should begin to form rank-and-file strike committees to take matters into their own hands, calling out workers across the whole hospital for as long as it takes until their demands are met. Michigan Medicine workers are in a position of immense power with the support of the entire working class behind them.

Socialist Equality Party vice presidential candidate Jerry White spoke to workers at a July informational picket. He spoke on the fact that the problems of healthcare cannot be solved at one hospital alone. He stated,

Safe staffing and other improvements will not come from appeals to the UM Board of Regents, a gang of corporate executives and politicians who oversaw the brutal suppression

of campus protests against the US-backed genocide in Gaza. Nor will it come from the establishment of more joint labor-management staffing committees, which are subordinated to corporate profit.

It will only be won through mobilizing the strength of all Michigan Medicine workers in a common strike action and by appealing to broader sections of the working class. This means building rank-and-file committees to transfer power from the union apparatus to the workers on the hospital floor. A special warning must be made about the leaders of the American Federation of Teachers and former UAW President Bob King, who is now the executive director of UMMAP. Both have long served the interests of big business and the Democratic Party, and rank-and-file workers can place no trust in them.

Staffing problems are not an accident. They are a deliberate policy. Hospitals are run as leanly as possible to maximize profit. At the same time, the Biden administration has overseen the dismantling of any COVID-19 public health measures, even as the death toll surpasses 420 a day and more than 1.4 million Americans have perished from the virus. The Democrats and Republicans also claim there is no money for decent living standards and healthcare even as they spend \$1 trillion on war, and the healthcare giants rake in hundreds of billions.

That is why profit must be taken out of the medicine. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the establishment of a socialist healthcare system to guarantee free, high quality healthcare for all. This will only be accomplished through the development of a powerful and politically independent movement of the working class.



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