

Michigan Medicine hospital workers vote for strike action by 98 percent

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Thousands of hospital workers at Michigan Medicine in Ann Arbor, Michigan have shown their determination to win major gains in a new contract, voting by 98 percent to authorize a one-day strike.

On Friday, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Healthcare Michigan leadership announced the vote result and said a ten-day strike notice had been delivered to the Michigan Medicine administration. A one-day walkout will take place on Tuesday, October 15. The workers voted on the action during the month of September.

The 2,700 workers—respiratory therapists, ECMO (extracorporeal membrane oxygenation) specialists, phlebotomists, patient care technicians, inpatient unit clerks and clerical staff—are demanding restoration of benefits that were frozen at the start of the coronavirus pandemic, and for an increase in wages that bring their pay into line with other unionized workers at the hospital.

The workers are fighting for their first contract with the multi-billion dollar, ostensibly public, healthcare system operated by the University of Michigan. The SEIU was officially recognized by Michigan Medicine as the bargaining agent for the workers beginning in July 2023.

SEIU members are also fighting alongside of over 4,000 other hospital employees in the Union of Michigan Medicine Allied Professionals (UMMAP) and United Physician Assistants of Michigan Medicine (UPAMM), who are also demanding their first contracts with the university health system.

The anger and determination of the healthcare workers to fight understaffing, overwork and harsh treatment by management is palpable; with pressure growing for mass action against the hospital to win improvements in wages, benefits and working conditions.

Workers are fed up with the hostility of Michigan Medicine to their concerns. Although negotiations have been going on for weeks, the university has so far refused

to address their demands for increased wages. The workers know the university is well-funded and has the financial resources to make acquisitions and purchase real estate for an expansion of the hospital.

What hospital workers are up against is the capitalist profit system, and the corporate and financial interests that stand behind Michigan Medicine and the University of Michigan Board of Regents. The expansion of Michigan Medicine, which is part of the consolidation of the entire US healthcare industry, is being carried out on the backs of the workforce and through the intensified exploitation of the hospital workers that is behind the intolerable wages, benefits and working conditions.

On April 1, 2024, Sparrow Health System was officially renamed University of Michigan Health-Sparrow, following the \$800 million acquisition of the Lansing, Michigan-based hospital system, adding six hospitals to the Ann Arbor healthcare giant. Meanwhile, Michigan Medicine also made a \$4.42 million purchase of real estate in Troy, Michigan in order to expand its facilities into the Detroit metropolitan area.

The university healthcare system is also completing construction of a \$1 billion in-patient hospital facility in Ann Arbor called the Pavilion, which is scheduled to open in the fall of 2025.

Michigan Medicine has nearly 30,000 employees, including 3,900 university faculty, 6,000 nurses, 1,800 residents, 300 clinical fellows, and 1,500 service and maintenance staff. The Michigan Medicine staff represents more than half of the entire workforce at the University of Michigan.

With 11 affiliated hospitals, Michigan Medicine is the fourth largest healthcare system in the state. If ranked by net patient revenue, Michigan Medicine is the largest in the state with over \$4 billion in revenue from patient services, a metric that measures the financial health of a hospital system.

On September 24, Michigan Medicine named David C. Miller as the incoming CEO of the healthcare system, to take office in July 2025. Although his salary has not been released publicly, Miller will replace Marschall Runge, who has held the position since 2016 and was paid a salary of more than \$1.6 million in 2023.

The growing and explosive movement of Michigan Medicine employees is part of an expanding struggle by workers around the world against decades of attacks on living standards and basic rights. These struggles have erupted against not just the employers, but as well the union bureaucracy, which has worked to contain the movement and protect the interests of the corporations.

The current strike by 33,000 machinists at Boeing resulted after they rejected a contract by 95 percent that was accepted by the leadership of the International Association of Machinists (IAM). Also, after 45,000 dock workers went on strike last Tuesday, shutting 36 ports in the East and Gulf coasts, the leadership of the International Longshoreman's Association (ILA) shut down the action in direct collaboration with the Biden administration.

In a press release on Friday, SEIU deputy trustee Larry Alcock made clear that the leadership of the union is opposed to strike action and are using the tactic of a one-day walkout as a means of containing the growing anger of the rank and file. Alcock said the union was "keeping our focus on the goal of a successful contract resolution." He continued, "No one wants to go on strike, but sometimes the message must be loud and must be clear."

In other words, the SEIU leadership has no intention of mobilizing the power of the entire workforce at Michigan Medicine and throughout the University of Michigan to win workers' demands.

Similarly, the leadership of UMMAP has organized two "practice pickets," one on Monday, October 7 from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., and another to take place Thursday, October 10 from 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. at the hospital's Taubman center. These practice pickets are being used as a means of avoiding a direct confrontation with the hospital and university administration.

All three of the unions engaged in contract struggles are keeping the workers isolated from one another and blocking a unified fight against the hospital and the university administration.

Meanwhile, behind the refusal of the SEIU, UMMAP and UPAMM leaderships to mobilize the workforce—and call upon other organized hospital employees such as the nurses in the University of Michigan Professional Nurse

Council (UMPNC)—is their political alliance with the Democratic Party. With the presidential elections now one month away, the union apparatus is focused on containing any movement of the working class that will expose the pro-war, pro-corporate and anti-working class agenda of the Harris-Walz campaign.

Taking forward the struggle against Michigan Medicine management requires that hospital employees break free from the union bureaucracy and form independent rank-and-file committees that will place the conduct of the contract fight in the hands of the workers themselves. All the details of the negotiations with hospital management must be made public and workers' basic demands must become the starting point for an uncompromising fight that includes all-out strike action.

The rank-and-file committee must also begin with the understanding that Michigan Medicine workers are fighting to take profit out of health care, and this means mounting an offensive against capitalism. Such an offensive requires that all Michigan Medicine workers are united in a common struggle against the University of Michigan Board of Regents and in opposition to the union's alliance with the Democratic Party, the sister party alongside the Republican Party, of American capitalism.

The rank-and-file committee must also unite Michigan Medicine workers with other sections of workers at the university and throughout the working class—such as the transport and airline industry, the auto industry and the tech industry—in a unified struggle for socialism.



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