

Support the fight of University of Michigan nurses!

By Niles Niemuth
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Niles Niemuth is the Socialist Equality Party 's candidate for Congress in Michigan 's 12th Congressional District. Visit niles2018.com to donate and get involved in the campaign.

Workers everywhere must support the struggle of nurses at Michigan Medicine, formerly University of Michigan Health System, who are battling for adequate staff-to-patient ratios and for decent pay and health care benefits.

The 6,000 nurses have voted by a 94 percent margin to authorize a strike at the giant health care provider, demonstrating their determination to fight for safe staffing levels and decent compensation. However, they face an intransigent and ruthless management in the thrall of corporate interests and a trade union bureaucracy that will do everything in its power to divert and dissipate workers' anger.

The University of Michigan Professional Nurses Council, an affiliate of the Michigan Nurses Association, is seeking to limit any job action to a token protests and job actions. At the same time, management is issuing threats that it will take legal action against nurses to prevent a work stoppage and is prepared to hire temporary staff—that is, strikebreakers—in the event of a walkout.

Management is seeking to increase the critical nurses-to-patient ratio, which is currently one of the best in the country for nurse staffing. Studies have shown that a patient's risk of dying increases dramatically if nurse workloads are increased.

At the same time, Michigan Medicine is proposing a 3 to 4 percent pay increase over the next three years, a raise that falls far short of inflation. This, along with cuts in retirement benefits, amounts to significant concessions at a time when management reported \$103 million in profits in fiscal year 2018.

A further source of anger is the implementation of Victors Care, the establishment of a two-tier health system that provides better service and treatment for wealthy patients who can afford to pay. While providing 24-hour on-demand specialized care for the affluent, it diverts vital resources from overall patient care. More than 300 faculty and physicians have signed a letter protesting this two-tier system.

Long-time services, such as meals for patients and bereavement food trays for families in emergency rooms, have been eliminated. The hospital administration has begun to remove traditional in-house services from nurses, too. One instance involves a new effort to implement remote telemetry practices where heart rates of up to 64 patients are now monitored remotely at the hospital by a single nurse, instead of allowing one nurse to monitor three patients personally in home.

University of Michigan nurses must broaden their struggle and seek the widest possible support in the working class. This means the building of democratic, rank-and-file workplace committees to oversee their struggle, including negotiations and strike preparations.

The allies of nurses are not Democratic politicians like Congresswoman Debbie Dingell, in the pay of corporate PACs, but teachers, autoworkers, steelworkers, Amazon workers and all those throughout the world fighting for better living standards and a better future.

Workers have again and again shown their determination to struggle, like teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona. However, in each of these actions, the critical question has been leadership. The unions have demonstrated that they serve not the interests of workers, but of big business and the corporate-controlled political establishment. In each

struggle, they seek to prevent strikes and, if that is impossible, to isolate workers and wear down resistance.

The broadest industrial mobilization of workers must be combined with an independent political strategy. I urge nurses to give careful consideration to the program advanced by my campaign.

As the Socialist Equality Party candidate for Congress in Michigan's 12th District, I call for a socialist program for health care. The capitalist principle of health care for profit must be ended. Health care is a social right. High-quality access to health care must be available to all free of charge.

There are plenty of resources to ensure the right to health care as well as decent pay and benefits for nurses and all workers. These resources are monopolized by a tiny layer of the population. Three individuals in the US own more wealth than the bottom half of the population. The policies of the Obama administration after the 2008 crisis, and now the Trump administration, have ensured the endless redistribution of wealth from the working class to the rich.

I call for the expropriation of the wealth of the financial oligarchy to be redirected to meet social need. The major banks and corporations, including those in the health care industry, must be turned into democratically controlled institutions, run on the basis of social need, not private profit.

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