

SEIU Healthcare WI: Hundreds of UW Health nurses in Madison vote overwhelmingly to strike for quality patient care and recognition of their union

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Madison, Wis. — On Aug. 24, hundreds of nurses at UW Health voted by 99% to strike for safe, quality patient care and recognition of their union. UW nurses have been struggling with a dangerous crisis of understaffing, turnover, cuts, exhaustion and burnout, which has been aggravated by the pandemic and puts patient care at risk. They are calling for a union voice on the job so they can solve these critical problems and advocate for their patients, community, families and themselves.

Nurses say they would much rather work with UW Health to address the escalating crisis and cooperatively ensure safe staffing, retention and quality care. But the UW Health administration and board have adamantly refused union recognition while conditions worsen, leaving nurses with no other option than to strike. The strike is set to begin at 7 a.m. Sept. 13 and end at 7 a.m. Sept. 16. However, nurses are leaving the door open for dialogue, and the responsibility is on the UW Health Board and administration to come to the table and recognize their union in order to avoid the imminent strike. If nurses do strike, they will provide an official notice to UW Health at least 10 days in advance so the administration can make preparations to ensure patient safety.

“We’re striking to put an end to the vicious cycle of understaffing and burnout and to win a union voice so we can protect the health of our patients and each other,” said **Tami Burns, who has been a caregiver for over two decades, a**

registered nurse for eight years, and has worked at UW Health since 2017.

“I became a nurse because I believe deeply in helping people. Previously I served in the military and I see nursing – and the fight for our union – as a continuation of my service to my community and my country.”

Tami continued, “I’ve cared for Covid patients throughout the pandemic, and my colleagues and I have seen more patient deaths than ever before in our careers. Compounding this brutal experience has been the almost total lack of support and resources from the UW Health administration. We’ve been suffering from extreme short staffing and cuts, and there’s a mass exodus of our talented nurses. Many of the nurses who’ve left have been medically diagnosed with PTSD, including myself. UW nurses must have a union so that we can stay in this essential profession we love and continue to be there for our patients.”

The strong majority of UW nurses have been calling for recognition of their union for nearly three years in order to have a seat at the table. Over 1,500 nurses have signed cards saying they want a union, and the size of the union would be about 2,600.

In June, the Wisconsin Attorney General agreed with top legal experts from around the country and [officially declared](#) once and for all that UW Health can recognize the nurses’ union. He stated, “I conclude that it is within the [UW Hospitals and Clinics] Authority’s statutory power to voluntarily engage in collective bargaining.” Instead of engaging in dialogue with nurses, the UW Health administration launched a toxic anti-union campaign that includes threats to fire nurses for their union activity. Nurses fear that these scare tactics further undermine patient care by increasing stress on staff, which could lead to more turnover.

“Elected officials, faith leaders, the union movement, and our entire community are united in our demand to the UW Hospitals and Clinics Authority (UWHCA) and administration: recognize the UW Health nurses’ union immediately and stop the retaliation to ensure quality patient care,” said **State Senator Melissa Agard**. “Day after day, nurses care for us and our loved ones, and go above and beyond the call of duty to provide for some of our most vulnerable. As one of the largest employers and healthcare providers in the state, UW Health has a moral responsibility to be a leader in setting the highest standards for care, jobs, and workers’ rights. It is absolutely unacceptable that they are refusing to recognize the nurses’ union and threatening them with retaliation for their union activity. Like other workers in Wisconsin, UW nurses are protected by state employment laws

providing them with the legal right to engage in concerted activity, including the right to strike, free of retaliation. Providing UW Health nurses with a union voice in the workplace will create a more collaborative, safe, and respectful work environment that will improve the lives of both nurses and patients. Today, I want to say to all the nurses at UW Health that I honor your sacrifice, I understand the value in the work that you do, and I will continue to be shoulder to shoulder with you in your fight to unionize and bargain for better working conditions.”

UW nurses once were members of SEIU Healthcare Wisconsin, but when their last union contract expired in 2014, executives used Wisconsin Act 10 as an excuse not to negotiate a new agreement. The administration then implemented dozens of harmful cuts, including to nurses’ staffing levels, health insurance and continuing education benefits, resulting in severe difficulties with recruitment and retention.

UW nurses are at the forefront of a resurgent movement of healthcare workers throughout the country who have sacrificed on the front lines of the pandemic for three years and are demanding a union voice so they can protect their patients and themselves. Thousands of workers in many other industries are also forming unions and refusing to accept the status quo of an economy that does not respect or reward their voices, hard work and sacrifices.

“I’m striking so nurses at the bedside are involved in decision making about how we deliver patient care, not just executives in the boardroom,” said **Colin Gillis, who has been a registered nurse at UW Health for five years.** “Turnover and understaffing force us to make gut wrenching decisions: Do I stay with a patient who’s medically unstable, or do I leave to give medicine to someone in dire pain? I’m no longer willing to allow UW Health to put me in those impossible situations.”

Colin continued, “I’ve worked on a COVID unit from the start of the pandemic, and it has been one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. I’ve also had experiences that will haunt me for the rest of my life. I remember one particularly tough night when we had to take a Covid patient down to the intensive care unit to say his last goodbyes to his child, who was dying from the virus. While we were putting our lives and our families’ lives on the line for our patients, the UW Health administration didn’t treat us as essential, but expendable. They didn’t include frontline nurses in decisions about protective equipment, staffing, training, retention or safety. They continue to treat us this way. Only with a union voice can we solve systemic problems so our community gets the care they deserve.”