



SEIU Nurses and Healthcare Workers Win Major Agreements

March has been an exciting month for the Madison labor movement, as nurses and healthcare workers rallied the community, faith leaders, elected officials and a broad range of union members to their cause, and won major agreements at UnityPoint Health-Meriter Hospital and Oakwood Village. Members of SEIU Healthcare Wisconsin at both facilities have endured a brutal year on the front lines of the battle against COVID-19, putting their lives and their families lives on the line to provide quality, compassionate care. The exhaustion, anxiety and trauma of this experience particularly motivated workers to fight passionately for contracts that ensure they can recover from the pandemic, and are fully valued and respected for their essential work.

On March 20th, with the threat of a strike looming, the 850 registered nurses at UnityPoint Health-Meriter voted to approve a new contract by a near-unanimous vote. Nurses secured meaningful improvements to key policies including: expanded and fully replenished paid time off for nurses who used up their leave during the pandemic--up to 60 hours of additional paid time off to use this year to rest and recover; improved extra shift pay to better value the sacrifices nurses make when they stay past their scheduled hours or come in on short notice on their days off; improved base pay to help recruit and retain more staff and solve chronic nursing shortages; and a greater voice in decisions during current and future public health crises so that nurses can better protect themselves and their patients.

“With this contract, we showed what is possible when workers come together in our union and have a collective say in our workplaces and in our lives,” said Reno Gatton, a registered nurse at Meriter and member of the bargaining committee. “The pandemic has exposed what a problem it is that so many nurses can’t speak out together because they don’t have a union. Going forward, nurses at Meriter will stand in solidarity with nurses at UW, St. Mary’s and other facilities joining together to advocate for quality care, better work-life balance, and the respect they deserve.”

Nurses mobilized support from a broad range of elected officials including Gov. Tony Evers, Sen. Tammy Baldwin, Sen. Bernie Sanders, Rep. Mark Pocan, Lieutenant Governor Mandela Barnes, Madison Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway, State Sen. Melissa Agard, State Rep. Francesca Hong, State Rep. Lisa Subeck, State Sen. Kelda Roys and others.

The South Central Federation of Labor also organized a “Community-Labor Speak Out” which was covered extensively in the media and attended by dozens of unions, including members of the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) Local 311, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 159, American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME Retirees, sub-chapter 52), Teamsters Local 344, Building Trades Council of South Central Wisconsin, and Madison Teachers.

“This is not only about taking a stand for Meriter nurses, but also for all our colleagues throughout the hospital, and all healthcare workers and essential workers throughout our state and country who have sacrificed so much over the past year,” said Suzi Kossel, registered nurse at Meriter and bargaining committee member. “I was proud the elected bargaining committee was able to unanimously and enthusiastically recommend that our co-workers vote to approve this agreement.”

In the final scheduled days of negotiations as nurses prepared to go on strike if necessary, more than 2,500 people, almost half of them nurses who work at other Madison-area hospitals, signed a pledge to say that they would not cross the Meriter nurses’ picket line if they had gone on strike.

Nurses say they hope their achievement will set new precedents throughout Wisconsin and the nation, leading the way for other nurses, caregivers and essential workers to win similar urgent protections through a union voice.

At Oakwood Village, Madison’s largest senior living organization, workers ratified their contract earlier this month after organizing both on the job and in the community. Workers there were focused on making sure their hard work and sacrifices were recognized, defending against proposed cuts, addressing turnover and making sure they could attract and keep staff to provide quality care. Oakwood staff received overwhelming support from faith leaders including Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice, with some clergy even sitting in on negotiations over Zoom.

“I have a passion for taking care of seniors, and take deep pride in helping the residents of Oakwood Village have the most fulfilling life,” said Tammy Schutz, a resident assistant and member of the bargaining committee. “Our union and our contract help us provide that care, because we have a say in our jobs and we can work toward solving staff turnover with good wages and benefits. Our union is our voice for our residents, our families and each other.”

Their contract includes increased pay for employees on care units who work extra shifts; no health insurance takeaways; significant raises; and preservation of longevity pay that management cut from non-union employees.

“The moments I like best in my job are when I’m helping the residents hang pictures on their walls—I get a chance to talk to them about their families and art, and make their rooms feel like home,” said Peter F. Thurlow, a facilities technician in the Oakwood building maintenance department. “I was infected by COVID and had to be out a couple weeks, I had other coworkers who got more ill than I did, and of course we lost some residents. After everything we’ve been through, I’m really proud we were able to win a contract which keeps our health insurance affordable and provides fair raises to recognize, recruit and retain staff. Our successful efforts at Oakwood and Meriter are making healthcare workers throughout Madison and the state realize that if we stand up together in our union, we will have the support of our community and faith leaders, and we have real power to change our lives.”

This article was submitted by SEIU. Service Employees International Union is a labor union representing almost 1.9 million workers in over 100 occupations in the United States and Canada. SEIU is focused on organizing workers in three sectors: health care, including hospital, home care and nursing home workers; public services; and property services