News



A health care employee holds a sign during the August strike at Trinity Grand Haven hospital. Workers said the strike was intended to draw attention to what they say are the hospital's bad-faith bargaining, low wages, unsafe staffing levels and attempts to undermine the union. (Courtesy of SEIU Healthcare Michigan)



by Katie Collins Scott

Former Staff Reporter

View Author Profile
kcscott@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

October 11, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Trinity Health Michigan, part of the third largest Catholic health care system in the United States, is facing accusations that it has embraced bold anti-worker and anti-union tactics as its workers fight for higher wages, adequate staffing levels and improved safety measures.

"We haven't dealt with an employer like this before in the state and are continually shocked at the lengths Trinity is going to in order to silence their employees," said Robert Gibson, hospital director at the Michigan health care arm of Service Employees International Union, or SEIU.

One of the state's biggest employers, Trinity has defended its actions and slammed SEIU for what it calls "destructive" strategies that disrupt health care and should "be cause for public alarm."

Union activity rises among health care workers

While the percentage of U.S. workers who belong to a union continues to decline, union activity is on the rise, including in health care.

There has been an uptick in strikes involving health care workers, according to the labor action tracker run by Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

And Christopher Friese, a professor of nursing, health management and policy at the University of Michigan, said health care employees have increased their attempts to pursue collective bargaining.

Over the past six months, SEIU Healthcare Michigan — representing diagnostic imaging techs, lab assistants and technologists, social workers, housekeepers, dietary workers and medics — has filed dozens of unfair labor practice charges with

the National Labor Relations Board.

Allegations center on two hospitals, several outpatient labs and a nursing home and include claims the Catholic health care system engaged in bad-faith bargaining, illegally fired workers and unlawfully withdrew recognition from a union.

"Making baseless allegations and using the media to plant false narratives is the SEIU way," Trinity Health Michigan told NCR in a statement. "We will not be intimidated by their bullying … and we will stand up for what is right."



Clayton Sinyai is executive director of The Catholic Labor Network. (Courtesy of Clayton Sinya)

Nationally, Trinity Health, with facilities in 26 states, is the result of a consolidation between two health care systems in 2013 — at the time one of the largest mergers in the industry — and reflects the overall growth of Catholic health care in the United States. Trinity is the fifth largest health care system in the country.

Clayton Sinyai, executive director of the Catholic Labor Network, said Catholic hospitals, once run mostly by women religious, are now generally managed by lay administrators trained in the same schools of business and management as those running secular, for-profit firms.

"Too often they also think the same way," said Sinyai. "In almost every case where workers at a Catholic hospital have tried to form a union, management has resisted them in much the same way that those firms do."

Sinyai pointed to Ascension Saint Agnes Hospital in Baltimore, where he said administrators "are fighting hard against their nurses who are trying to organize a union."

Since Pope Leo XIII's encyclical Rerum Novarum in 1891, the church officially has taught that workers have a right to organize. The U.S. bishops' 1986 pastoral letter on economic justice and their ethical and religious directives for Catholic hospitals "explicitly endorse Catholic hospital workers' right to form unions and bargain collectively," Sinyai said.

In its statement to NCR, Trinity Health Michigan said it is "committed to maintaining a direct and open dialogue with our colleagues, and we also respect their right to seek union representation if they choose."

"Our health system has followed and will continue to follow all federal labor laws related to worker rights, as overseen by the National Labor Relations Board," it read.

Employee firings contested

Currently underway is a weekslong federal hearing in which National Labor Relations Board agents are arguing that in March Trinity illegally fired an outpatient lab manager and 11 pro-union lab workers in Ann Arbor and nearby Canton.

The complaint states that the health care system engaged in several illegal anti-union actions, among them terminating the manager because she "refused to commit unfair labor practices" and discharging the workers to discourage them from engaging in union activities.



Sonya Ascencio — a housekeeper who cleans and disinfects medical equipment and patient rooms — tears up while speaking at a strike outside Trinity Health Grand Haven hospital in Michigan Aug. 4. She is supported by Robert Gibson, hospital director at SEIU Healthcare Michigan. The union has filed dozens of unfair labor practice charges against the Catholic health care system. (Courtesy of SEIU Healthcare Michigan)

In January, lab workers began organizing a union with SEIU in part because the health care system failed to address safety issues, according to former employees and the union.

One employee said they'd faced patients with guns and patients who threw feces at workers.

"There were many safety concerns that we submitted, and there was never any correspondence from Trinity," said Tiffany Hammoud, who worked at the Ann Arbor lab as a patient services representative.

In a March 17 press release, Trinity said the union's description of events at the lab were "grossly distorted" and that all "reported safety concerns brought to leadership were investigated and immediately addressed."

> 'There are employees making under $15 an hour, some earn $12 an hour, and that's just not enough money.'
> —Ricky Kauffman
>
> Tweet this

Former employees and SEIU leaders said Trinity retaliated against lab workers' organizing efforts with union-busting strategies, such as attempted surveillance.

Julie Furciarelli was a longtime employee who served as team lead for outpatient labs. She told NCR that on March 8 a colleague informed her that Trinity management was "going through our office when no one was in there looking for a union book and union cards."

The following day, Furciarelli and her colleagues learned the lab manager, who was well-liked, had been fired.

SEIU Healthcare Michigan claims the termination was because the manager refused to go through workers' belongings to look for union materials. Trinity said she voluntarily resigned.



Ricky Kauffman, a union supporter and lead radiology tech at Trinity Grand Haven, is pictured at the hospital. "The low wages have created a staffing crisis," he told NCR. (Courtesy of SEIU Healthcare Michigan)

The alleged firing, plus news about surveillance, created distress and panic, said Furciarelli and Hammoud.

The lab lead "called us into the lunch room to have a conversation," Hammoud recalled. "She stated that our manager was terminated and if we all wanted to take the day to process this, we were free to do so.

"Some of us were visibly upset and crying, but it affected every one of us," said Hammoud, who along with 10 colleagues opted to take a personal day and left work early.

Trinity went on to terminate the 11 workers. It said they abandoned their duties voluntarily and with no notice and "put patient safety at risk."

Hammoud told NCR Trinity's actions have been financially devastating for her family but that she also finds it "disturbing that Trinity has not displayed their Catholic foundation and values."

"They are still refusing to do the right thing," she said.

Several months after the firings at the outpatient laboratories, workers secured a union. Their terminated colleagues, meanwhile, said they hope the results of the hearing, in progress as of Oct. 10, will give them their jobs back.

Trinity withdraws union recognition

Earlier this year in Muskegon, in western Michigan, Trinity ended talks with union employees of a nursing home after the two parties had been in negotiations for months. In 2022, nurses at Trinity-owned hospital in Muskegon obtained a new contract following three years of contentious bargaining.

In an especially contentious conflict with several twists, Trinity announced late last month that it no longer recognizes SEIU as representing nearly 200 employees at its hospital in Grand Haven, a city on the Eastern shore of Lake Michigan.

Trinity officials said they received a petition from workers Sept. 28 showing "clear and objective evidence" that the union had lost majority support. They have not shared details about the petition's contents or who circulated it.



Employees of Trinity Health Grand Haven hospital and union supporters participate in the strike at Trinity Grand Haven hospital in August. (Courtesy of SEIU Healthcare Michigan)

News of the petition, however, followed a decertification election conducted by the national labor board Sept. 18-19, with the results showing an 89 to 66 vote in favor of continued union representation at the hospital. The vote count was delayed at the union's request due to outstanding unfair labor practice charges against Trinity; the ballots were tallied a day after Trinity's announcement, Sept. 29.

Under the law, it is illegal for Trinity to withdraw recognition for one year from the date of the decertification election, according to Anthony Kaled, SEIU general counsel.

A union enjoys "an irrebuttable presumption of majority status during the certification year," according to the NLRB website.

But federal labor law also allows employers to withdraw recognition of a bargaining unit when presented with evidence that the majority of union members wish to leave the union, according to a press release from Trinity.

Trinity said that because employees submitted their petition before the vote count, it takes precedence over the election outcome.

Michelle Fecteau, director of the Center for Labor and Community Studies at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, said while the labor board ultimately will sort out the situation — SEIU quickly filed an unfair labor practice charge — it sounds like Trinity is testing the waters.

"It looks like they are seeing if they can get away with this approach and delay the bargaining," she said. "It seems to me like gamesmanship."

In August, workers at Trinity Health Grand Haven staged a one-day strike after Trinity halted negotiations. The employees said the strike was to highlight what they say are the hospital's bad-faith bargaining, unsafe staffing levels, repeated attempts to undermine the union and low wages.

Advertisement

"There are employees making under $15 an hour, some earn $12 an hour, and that's just not enough money," Ricky Kauffman, a lead radiology tech at Trinity Grand Haven, told NCR in a recent interview. A living wage in Michigan is more than $16 an hour for an individual, according to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology living wage calculator.

Low wages make it difficult to retain and attract workers, creating a staffing crisis that impacts patient care, said Kauffman.

After withdrawing recognition of the union, Trinity Health announced in a press release it would implement across-the-board wage increases for workers, including those formerly represented by SEIU.

Hospital employees told NCR they believe the decertification election, held about six weeks after the strike, was pushed by Trinity's management.

"They were misleading staff," Kauffman said. "People came up to me who felt like they had to sign it or didn't know what it was for."

"Trinity fully expected their electioneering would win," said Kaled. "They only attempted the stunt of 'withdrawing recognition' after they determined they failed to fully crush the workers' protected concerted activity."

Kauffman said he remains committed to returning to the negotiating table with Trinity to win a contract that "respects all frontline workers, wins fair raises and prioritizes safe staffing."

Trinity "keeps trying to spin it that unions — that we, its own workers — are weak and don't have support," Kauffman added. "We do."