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DMC Nurses testify before Labor Committee in effort to unionize

By Eric T. Campbell
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David Singleton, a nurse at Harper Hospital, testifies before House Labor Committee.

DETROIT – Before a panel of state lawmakers, several Detroit Medical Center nurses testified to being victims of anti-union practices and workplace intimidation in a special hearing Friday, Nov. 30.

The hearing, hosted by the Sacred Heart Church Activity Center, was the second held by members of the House of Representatives Labor Committee, who are gathering evidence in support of a proposed employee rights bill.

The legislation would bolster a year-long struggle by the DMC nurses to address working conditions through collective bargaining. The DMC Organizing Committee for Change has filed a petition for union recognition with the National Labor Relations Board.

Fred Miller (D-Mount Clemens) is a chief sponsor of House Bill 4443, which seeks to ban companies from spending public funds to obstruct union organizing activities. Miller told the Michigan Citizen that this is not the first time a version of this bill has been proposed and that it's undergoing a process of revision, but the focus remains clear.

"The purpose is to make sure tax payer dollars go directly to their intended destination," Miller said in a phone interview.

Hearing testimony from the nurses is important because of current workplace conditions at the DMC, according to Miller, who recently spoke with DMC CEO Mike Duggan. Duggan told Miller he is not using tax dollars, but did not deny the occurrence of anti-union activities.

"There's not a whole lot of places the money could be coming from," Miller said.

The DMC is compromising its medical obligations to the community by spending tax dollars on union busting activities, according to Ken Fletcher, Director of Government Affairs for the Michigan Nurses Association (MNA). The MNA is the largest union for registered nurses in Michigan.

"Hospitals receive a large amount of money from the taxpayers," Fletcher told the Michigan Citizen. "They shouldn't be misappropriating that money and spending it to fight a union-organizing drive. Nurses should be able to make a decision, on their own, without interference from their employer about whether they want to form a union."

During the hearing, hospital staffers were candid and united in their declaration that any DMC employee who was suspected of union activity was subject to intimidation and threat of company action.

Cerefina Sharpe, a registered nurse for over 30 years, told the panel that anti-union literature was routinely handed out in the workplace and occasionally mailed to employees' homes.

“How much money is being spent to attack the idea that DMC nurses deserve a voice?” Sharpe asked, at one point breaking down into tears. “I urge the DMC to stop wasting resources and tax dollars trying to bust the union.”

DMC nurses also testified to being required to attend 2-4 hour meetings after a full shift—only to be bombarded with disparaging remarks about labor unions.

Linda Cross, an RN at Hutzel Hospital, testified that she was told by hospital administrators that “the union is a cult. You are being hoodwinked and bamboozled.”

RN Pat Carson of the Detroit Rehab Institute remarked that “it’s unfair to use public dollars while continuing to maintain poor nurse to patient ratios.”

Jeanette Reed, a Harper Hospital RN who often has 11 or 12 patients under her care, was written up for the first time in 30 years for passing out organizing material.

“I’m tired of being told by management how bad the union is for me,” Reed told legislators.”

Another Harper RN, David Singleton, testified that he had been “interrogated” for two hours by seven hospital representatives who thought he had engaged in lawful union activity.

Michigan House Bill 4443 is based on legislation passed by the California legislation in Sept. 2000. Assembly Bill 1889 “prohibits employers from using state money...to promote or deter unionization.”

Arguments for the California bill, documented in a recent University of California study, included claims that “the suppression of organizing campaigns had grown into a multi-million dollar business in recent years and that employers had spent tens of millions of dollars of state funds on a wide variety of anti-union activities...”. California unions argued that tax dollars were effectively being used against the workers who were paying them.

The California bill’s legal status has been challenged in state and circuit court and its fate now resides with the U.S. Supreme Court. The court’s decision on the matter will affect proposed ‘state neutrality’ bills across the nation.

Attorney for the Michigan Hospital Association, Greg Moore, argued before the House Labor Committee that although debating the issue was a worthy endeavor, any action by state legislators should wait until the pending Supreme Court decision.

“Let’s wait for the Supreme Court decision, so we don’t have to come back to the drawing board,” Moore said.

But according to Tova Perimutter, Executive Director of the Sugar Law Center, waiting would only squander an opportunity to influence the nationwide debate on an important labor issue.

“The Supreme Court and Congress need to know how the communities feel on this issue,” Perimutter told the panel. “If the Michigan legislature makes clear that it stands with the people on this issue, it will be heard.”

According to the MNA, DMC hospitals receive public money in the form of \$300 million in traditional Medicaid payments and \$35 million in state and federal funds in the form of Disproportionate Share Hospital payments.

“It is my right to form a union and be treated with dignity and respect,” RN David Singleton said. “I want to know how much money is being spent to train these managers to keep the DMC union-free.”

For more information on DMC nurses and their fight to organize visit www.minurses.org