

## Patience Leads to McLaren Greater Lansing RN Agreement

After long, difficult negotiations marked with hospital proposals for significant concessions, Local 459 secured a new contract that maintains healthcare for registered nurses at McLaren Greater Lansing (MGL).

Negotiations for a contract that had expired in September 2014 were slowed by hospital proposals to move RNs to the non-union insurances, waive the right to bargain over changes to insurance in the future (the so-called “me too” clause), eliminate all bonuses, freeze step increases after the contract expires, remove nursing assistants, unit assistants and unit coordinators from the staffing guidelines, end holiday pay and other changes to give management more control over staff’s schedules. In fact, it took more than a year before the hospital offered even a 1 percent pay increase in exchange for the many concessions proposed.

“The RNs understood they were better off with their current contract while they waited for a fair proposal from MGL,” said International Vice President and Local 459 President Sharon Taylor. These proposed concessions would cost more than any raises MGL was likely to offer. “When the McLaren Flint RN union accepted the non-union healthcare plan in September 2016, along with giving the hospital the latitude to change insurance in the future, the MGL nurses were even more determined to fend off these proposed cuts.”

The bargaining team didn’t simply wait around hoping MGL would change its mind. They established a negotiation steering committee to involve a greater number of members, improve communication and keep solidarity strong during the two-and-a-half-year struggle. The committee adopted a strategy of letting the contract expire to put additional pressure on the hospital to get a fair contract.

“It may not seem logical, but having a private sector contract expire can sometimes increase the union’s clout,” Taylor said.

“Every contract has a ‘management’s rights’ clause that allows an employer to operate their business. When the contract ends, so



*The Local 459 bargaining team, standing, John Endres, Service Representative Jeffrey Fleming and Jo Ellyn Steele; seated, Theresa Wing, Kyra Keusch, Chief Steward Julie Murray, Ellen Harmon and Malinda Green. Not pictured are alternates Deb Douglass and Deb Disler.*

does the management’s rights clause, so things the employer used to be able to do whenever it wanted now have to be negotiated with the union when it is a change in working conditions. Management cannot legally move forward with the change until bargaining is completed. This strategy raised the cost for MGL of not having a new contract.” The RNs understood they kept their current pay, benefits and working conditions, which included none of the concessions proposed by management, while negotiations continued.

The union continued to spar with the hospital over changes imposed by management, including how vacation time was awarded. When the hospital refused to bargain over the issue, Local 459 filed an unfair labor practice charge with the National Labor Relations Board, which agreed the hospital had a legal obligation to negotiate the

change with the union and moved forward with prosecuting MGL.

A tentative agreement was reached the week before the trial, which contained none of the concessions management had been proposing in exchange for Local 459 withdrawing its unfair labor practice charge. “The MGL RN contract is now the only one in the entire McLaren hospital system that maintained the current healthcare,” Taylor said. “The agreement added a new 3 percent step to the top of the pay scale, which means 40 percent of the RNs at the top moved to the new step in the first full pay period following ratification. All other RNs will reach this step as they progress through the pay scale.”

The RNs overwhelmingly ratified the tentative agreement, which runs through Sept. 30, 2018.