

The Context

The Wisconsin Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals (WFNHP) represents approximately 1,030 workers (372 RNs, 313 service workers, and 342 technical workers) at 250-bed St. Francis Hospital (STF), which is on the south-side of Milwaukee, WI.

For many years, WFNHP had a positive relationship with STF and its parent, Wheaton Franciscan, a not-for-profit Catholic healthcare corporation. On October 29, 2015, STF announced that they, along with all other Wheaton facilities in Wisconsin, were being taken over by Ascension Healthcare – the largest not-for-profit healthcare corporation in the nation, which took effect in March of 2016.

STF has been a closed-shop and about 85% of unit members pay full dues, with the remaining paying non-member dues. Despite high membership, activism has been low and the union has been seen as defending those facing discipline, rather than as a means to affect change.

Wisconsin became a “Right to Work” (RTW) state in 2015, which affects every facility at the end of its current contract. STF’s contract expires on October 14, 2016, making this the first contract bargained with Ascension *and* the first under RTW. Bargaining begins in August of 2016.

Additionally, Ascension has a checkered history in both union and non-union hospitals. They have partnered with an aggressive, for-profit debt collection company that was banned from doing business in Minnesota for two years. Ascension has also closed hospitals in low-income communities and moved to more affluent suburban areas, been sued in a class action lawsuit by employees alleging that the Ascension’s church-plan pension was underfunded by \$444 million, and were found to have conspired to suppress nurses’ wages in Detroit.

Overview of STF and Ascension

Status STF has historically been a community hospital, despite several instances of consolidation with progressively larger “not-for-profit” corporations. Ascension is also acquiring St. Joe’s in this transaction, which is non-union, in financial trouble and in a lower-income area.

Union WFNHP represents all STF RN, service and tech unit employees. The RNs organized in 1979, and the service and tech chapters organized in 1996. Union leadership has long maintained a good relationship with STF administrators. STF is the only unionized private sector hospital in Milwaukee. WFNHP represents approximately 900 other healthcare workers in the Milwaukee area. In the early 2000s, the union ran a successful public campaign around safe staffing that adversely affected public perception of the hospital. As such, subsequent

contracts include specific language that bars the union from disparaging or protesting the hospital.

- Governance** STF has had a local Board of Directors. In a neighboring state, Ascension has stripped local hospital boards of governing power in favor of a single statewide Board. It may do similarly in Wisconsin. Ascension recently hired an executive from out of state to run Ascension Wisconsin, and there is some speculation that they may try to combine leadership for STF and another Milwaukee hospital. The board of that hospital includes the son of a Republican strategist who “engineered” Scott Walker’s past campaigns.
- Finances** STF has done well financially in recent years and is in position to remain a profitable “not-for-profit” hospital. Ascension is the biggest and getting bigger, acquiring new hospitals across the country.
- Patient Billing** Ascension’s debt collection firm, Accretive, has been operating for years at its other Milwaukee hospital, CSM. Patients at CSM have complained about aggressive and confusing bill collections at the hospital. Ascension’s current contract with Accretive also means that Accretive will be the default debt collection firm at all of its hospitals going forward, including STF. In addition to other staff cost cutting measures Ascension pursues, this may lead to billing staff turnover and layoffs.
- Politics** Local elected officials are generally supportive of the union, at the city, county, and local state officials from the area. However, Wisconsin is a hyper-polarized political state with Milwaukee being one of a few “blue” areas in the state. Anti-union Republicans control all branches of government.
- Community** Milwaukee is the most segregated city in the country and one of the poorest, as well. WFNHP has good relationships with local unions and community groups, and most are supportive of the campaign. WFNHP has met with many of these organizations and wants to build a coalition around this campaign.
- Goals** Contract - No loss of services, no downsizing of staff, no cuts to benefits or pay, and a continuation of the community values of STF. Union - Increase membership, engage membership, build a coalition around this campaign.
- Strategy** Use bargaining to strengthen internal union structure and unity, build a strong community connection, and bargain for quality, affordable healthcare to demonstrate value of WFNHP and increase union membership in this time of transition in the face of RTW.