

[Second year of the longest nursing strike in history and how it has divided a small Michigan town](#)

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Body

MICHELE NORRIS, host:

From NPR News, this is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. I'm Michele Norris.

ROBERT SIEGEL, host:

And I'm Robert Siegel.

In Michigan, the state's longest-running nurses' strike has now entered its second year. Contract negotiations between the nurses' union and Northern Michigan Hospital in Petoskey are still at an impasse. Each side blames the other, and people who live in the area and depend on the hospital are caught in the middle of a bitter dispute. From Interlochen Public Radio, Linnaea Melcarek reports.

LINNAEA MELCAREK reporting:

It's a cold, overcast day and the wind is whipping off Lake Michigan and through the streets of the lakeside town of Petoskey. In front of Northern Michigan Hospital, five nurses hold up signs. One reads, 'We are Teamsters.' Another says, 'Nurses united cannot be defeated.' With almost 500 nurses, this hospital is the area's largest employer. More than half of them voted to join the union two years ago and left their jobs to strike in November of 2002. The issues were chiefly pay and benefits and an increased voice in management. Mary Clayton, an oncology nurse who started at Northern Michigan Hospital 20 years ago, is braving the wind today on the picket line. She says nobody expected the strike to last this long.

Ms. MARY CLAYTON (Oncology Nurse): Probably the first month, I drove around with my uniform in my car, thinking that anytime they'd call and say, 'Come back to work.' And then finally I took that out. And then we'd think, 'OK, by the first of the year we'll be back to work. This will never last till spring.' Then we went all summer. And we're still out here.

MELCAREK: The nurses smile and wave at the drivers who honk their car horns in support. But they say sometimes people swear at them or make obscene gestures.

The picket line has shrunk considerably over the past year, as quite a few nurses have left town, seeking other work. One even took a nursing job in Hawaii. Many strikers who stayed find themselves deeply in debt, though they insist the sacrifice is worth it. The strikers say that a nationwide shortage of nurses has led to overworked staff and unsafe conditions for patients at Northern Michigan Hospital. The union claims the hospital negotiated in bad faith and never really intended to reach an agreement with the nurses, but hospital spokesman Tom Spencer says management went as far as it could to avoid a strike.

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Mr. TOM SPENCER (Hospital Spokesman): We worked over 25 bargaining sessions. We do not agree on three particular issues that I believe are the reasons for the Teamsters' strike.

MELCAREK: Spencer says those three issues are management rights, nurses wages and benefits, and a dispute over union dues. No negotiations have been held since the hospital's final offer to the union last December.

Downtown at the Middle Street Pub, opinions about the strike are mixed. Of course everyone wants it to end, but people disagree over who's to blame. Brian Roberts, who's eating peanuts at the bar, says he's concerned that patient care has been compromised as traveling nurses replace the striking ones.

Mr. BRIAN ROBERTS: I've have friends who've had babies in that hospital and they received the worst service possible. They tried to get out of the hospital as quickly as they possibly could. And the quality of care has definitely declined.

MELCAREK: Hospital spokesman Tom Spencer disagrees the treatment has suffered. He points to inspection results that he says show that quality of care has not been effected. Carrie McDonald agrees. McDonald is a traveling nurse who's been working in the hospital's intensive care unit since April. She says she's heard only positive feedback about the replacement nurses and thinks for the most part patients receive excellent care.

Ms. CARRIE McDONALD (Traveling Nurse): I've worked in several hospitals, and I can say that this matches or beats all the hospitals I've worked in, as far as patient care.

MELCAREK: The hospital has hired dozens of traveling nurses as permanent replacements for the strikers. Meanwhile, the residents of Petoskey have come to expect seeing nurses standing outside holding picket signs as the strike continues with no end in sight. For NPR News, I'm Linnaea Melcarek.

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