AFSCME members protest Hennepin County Medical Center layoffs

By Steve Share, Labor Review editor

MINNEAPOLIS — AFSCME members and supporters marched outside Hennepin County Medical Center March 17, protesting the layoff of 131 workers as HCMC claims to face “financial challenge.”

“This is a lot of these people’s last day,” said Carmen Brown, president of AFSCME Local 977 which represents about 1,300 general services workers and clerical workers at HCMC. “We got the hardest hit,” she said.

AFSCME Local 977 includes workers who admit patients, set up for surgery, provide bedside care, keep the hospital clean, work in food service, and perform other essential jobs.

“The work hasn’t gone away; it’s just gotten dumped onto somebody else,” Brown noted.

Brown, Minneapolis, is now a patient services coordinator who has worked 20 years at HCMC. For her, the layoffs mean that “I’m doing the job of the person who’s leaving plus the work I did before.”

The layoffs are puzzling because 2015 brought HCMC’s second-most profitable year on record, according to research by the Minnesota Nurses Association, which represents HCMC nurses.

“We were told in our labor-management meetings for almost a year by [CEO] Dr. Pryor there would be no layoffs,” Brown said. And, she added, the hospital was hiring “rampantly” in December, January and February. “A lot of the workers feel like they’re purposefully trying to get rid of the older workers,” Brown said.

She added, “the hospital continually disrespects the contract. They’re continually reinterpreting the language.”

The last layoffs at HCMC came in 2008, Brown recalled, when workers volunteered for early retirement or offered to reduce their own hours to preserve co-workers’ jobs.

“This time, they said ‘no’ to everything we proposed,” Brown said. “This has been the worst process for layoffs I’ve ever seen.”

Brown described one unit, where the clerical staff has now been reduced from four to two. She reported, “the two workers called me crying, they’re tired and stressed out.” And, she added, they don’t feel they can take a sick day and leave the other alone to handle the work.

“This hospital can’t survive without us here,” said Sara Franck, Coon Rapids, president of AFSCME Local 2474, which includes about 900 technical and professional workers at HCMC. She is a dental assistant who has worked 20 years at HCMC.

“The layoffs are scary but the outsourcing of our work is even more scary,” Franck said. “They want to eliminate good, benefit-earning jobs for cheaper labor.”

In an op-ed published in the Star Tribune March 7, Brown and Franck wrote: “recognize that HCMC’s greatest asset is its frontline staff. We are the heart and soul of the system. Without us, people will not say, ‘Take me to HCMC.’”

In the op-ed, the two noted that HCMC’s CEO, Dr. Jon Pryor, “is one of Minnesota’s highest-paid public employees with a $700,000 annual salary, plus bonuses.”

The AFSCME locals are in the second year of a two-year contract, with negotiations for the next contract due to begin this fall.

AFSCME represents 2,200 of the 7,500 workers employed by HCMC.

The MNA’s HCMC nurses begin contract negotiations this summer.