

Minnesota nurses reject health care concessions, authorize strike

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On Monday, 5,000 Allina Health nurses in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area overwhelmingly rejected a contract proposal that would shift their union-sponsored health care plans to company insurance, which would dramatically increase the costs to the nurses. The nurses also opposed management demands to increase their workload via a shift to a computer staffing system.

The contract vote follows three months of bargaining between Allina Health, a major nonprofit hospital system in the Minnesota health care industry, and the Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA) union, after nurses overwhelmingly voted down initial company proposals in February.

In this week's vote, nurses again rejected the proposal by a margin well above the 66 percent majority required to authorize a strike at each of the four affected hospitals—Abbot Northwestern, United, Unity, and Mercy hospitals. The MNA has yet to detail plans to strike, stating that they will be meeting to plan the “next steps” for the coming weeks.

In the meantime, the MNA is ordering its members to continue to work although the contract that expired at the beginning of the month. Allina Health responded to the rejection by declaring that its offer included the same raises the MNA had negotiated at five other hospital systems earlier this year.

The offer of a flat 2 percent per year increase barely meets the rate of inflation and would be effectively eliminated many times over by the increased cost of health care for the nurses. Nurses who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* during their demonstration in May recalled all the previous raises they have given up in order to keep their health care.

During the bargaining discussions, Allina Health made it clear it is unwilling to consider any new

contract unless it eventually eliminates the current health care plan for nurses, citing \$10 million a year it would gain by transferring costs to the nurses. Allina Health issued an ultimatum for the MNA nurses to accept the cuts to their health care after the expiration of the current contract on June 1.

In more recent statements Allina Health representatives added their interest in bringing “competitive” health care to the nurses. This provides insight into the actual motives behind Allina Health's demands, which are in line with the cost-cutting measures being carried out by hospital systems across the country.

This is being encouraged by the Obama administration, which has spent its two terms, starting with the auto industry restructuring, engaged in a single-minded campaign to reduce real wages and shift the costs of health care and pensions from corporate America to the working class. A corollary of the misnamed Affordable Care Act, which seeks to drastically reduce the cost of employer-sponsored health care, is a relentless cost-cutting drive against health care workers.

Allina Health's drive to deprive hospital workers of affordable care follows the events of 2010 when nurses were determined to fight the company on the issue of staffing levels. In 2010, 12,000 nurses at six MNA-organized hospital systems, including Allina Health, voted for an open-ended strike to demand safe nurse-to-patient ratios. This followed months of intransigence from management and a one-day strike. Immediately after the open-ended strike was approved, the union called off the action, agreeing to minor wage increases and the retention of benefits in place of addressing nurse staffing levels.

The militancy of the nurses is part of the resurgence

of class struggle across the nation and internationally. Nearly 40,000 telecom workers on the East Coast of the United States conducted a seven-week strike against Verizon Communications. Teachers in Detroit and Chicago carried out sick-outs and a one-day strike to oppose attacks on their jobs and living standards and the privatization of public schools. Last fall, Fiat Chrysler autoworkers voted down a sellout contract pushed by the United Auto Workers. In France, Belgium and Greece, workers have been waging a determined battle against austerity and anti-worker laws.

Nurses at Allina Health, like workers throughout the US and the world, are confronting not just one particularly ruthless employer but a whole class of capitalist owners and financial institutions, which are backed to the hilt by the corporate-controlled political system. To fight the attacks on their jobs, health care and other social rights, nurses have to break out of the straitjacket imposed on them by the MNA, which is allied with the Obama administration and the Democrats. Instead, nurses should appeal directly to workers and young people throughout the Twin Cities to back their fight.



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