

Twin Cities nurses discuss political issues in strike

Anthony Bertolt, Matt Rigel
23 June 2016

The strike of nearly 5,000 nurses in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area against Allina Health, the largest hospital system in Minnesota, is continuing for its fifth day today. Striking nurses have named a number of issues at the forefront of their opposition to company demands, including cuts to their health care, the implementation of a computer staffing system to increase workloads for already overburdened nurses and workplace safety concerns.

The strike affects five major hospitals under the umbrella of Allina Health: Abbott Northwestern and Phillips Eye Institute in Minneapolis, United in St. Paul, Mercy Hospital in Coon Rapids and Unity in Fridley.

The walkout followed three months of negotiations between Allina Health and the Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA) union, an affiliate of National Nurses United (NNU). Allina is refusing to discuss staffing or any other issues until the MNA accepts the elimination of the nurses' current health care plan and its replacement with a company program that provides inferior coverage with higher co-pays and deductibles.

The MNA was forced to call the strike after nurses overwhelmingly rejected the company's contract proposal on June 6. The MNA, however, has limited the walkout to seven days and has kept another 7,000 nurses at other area hospitals on the job.

The company has used various strikebreaking agencies, including Health Source Global, to recruit 1,400 replacement nurses who are reportedly being paid \$8,400 a week, plus travel expenses, lodging and meals. While slandering strikers as selfish and oblivious to patient safety, Allina has employed poorly trained replacements.

One replacement nurse from Georgia quit from Mercy Hospital in Coon Rapids Wednesday citing

concerns about patient care and joined strikers on the picket line.

Meanwhile state regulators dispatched by Democratic Governor Mark Dayton's administration have backed the strikebreaking operation and issued no citations over hospital safety. Dayton, who married into the Rockefeller family fortune, served as an aide to former Minnesota Governor Rudy Perpich who dispatched the National Guard against striking Hormel workers in the 1980s.

The Twin Cities strike is part of increasing struggles by nurses against poor working conditions and the fact that many cannot afford their own health care plans. Nurses at the Los Angeles Medical Center are carrying out a one-day strike today, following a series of nurses' strikes over the last few years, including against Kaiser Permanente in California and Johns Hopkins Medical Center in Baltimore, Maryland.

Health care workers are facing relentless cost cutting and attacks on their working conditions, as part of the restructuring of the health care system initiated by Obama's misnamed Affordable Care Act.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Website* on Wednesday discussed the political issues in the strike with nurses at Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis.

Sarah, a nurse with 12 years of experience, told the WSWWS, "Obamacare hasn't really benefitted us—it's just costing a lot of people more money, which is why the hospitals are trying to come down on their employees, cities on teachers, and everyone else."

Sarah told the WSWWS that she agreed that the goal of Obamacare has been to shift the cost of health care onto the working class, while providing less coverage for working people.

As the discussion shifted to the US presidential

elections, Sarah said both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were “a losing proposition.” Referring to the promotion of identity politics by the Democrats, she added, “I don’t want to see a woman president elected, just to say ‘I was part of that, I made history.’ That is not how I want people to get into office. I support people because of their values and beliefs. She’s a lying crook, and so is Trump.”

Jenny, another Allina nurse, added, “It’s like a conspiracy, they’re all in it together,” referring to the incestuous relationship between the giant corporations and the government. “I don’t want to be rich. I want to have enough to know that my children will have a good future.”

WSWS reporters also spoke with Monique, a nurse with six years of experience, about the broader attack on health care workers. “They’re getting ready to go after our nursing assistants next, the pharmacists are in a battle, and the nurse anesthetists are in a battle as well.

“We’re being put in a situation where the working class will suffer tremendously. There will only be working-class people living in poverty and the upper class, the middle class will just disappear.”

Despite nursing being a professional career, Monique added, “What we make is no longer a livable wage. We might make a decent salary but is it going to be sustainable with the cost of living and the way things are going? There are several nurses out there who live paycheck to paycheck. Why? Because they still owe so much in student loans. They pay in student loans what I pay on a mortgage on my house. How can they chase the supposed ‘American Dream’ when they will never be able to own a house, or own a car?”

The MNA and National Nurses United (NNU) endorsed Bernie Sanders in order to provide themselves with a “left” cover under conditions of a growing radicalization among nurses. The Sanders campaign has been used to channel rising opposition within the political confines of the Democratic Party, which, no less than the Republicans, is spearheading the assault on workers’ living standards.

In a recent interview, NNU President RoseAnn DeMoro echoed Sanders’ fraudulent claim that the Democratic Party can be transformed into a “party of working people” and the capitalist system can be reformed.

“We’re staying with Bernie,” DeMoro said, “We’re going to fight for our issues through the convention, and we’re going to continue to fight for our issues... the Sanders campaign is about changing America. And it’s changing America from being a market to a society. And I think, at a visceral level, that’s what people really see and they want. They want their country back. And that’s what our campaign has been about.”

Decades of bitter experience have demonstrated that the Democratic Party—the second-oldest capitalist party in the world—can never be transformed into a party of working people. This was proven again over the last seven-and-a-half years as the “candidate of change,” Barack Obama, oversaw the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top in US history while overseeing endless wars.

Nurses must draw political lessons from the unions’ political subordination of workers to the Democratic Party. If the fight for decent living standards and the right to universal health care is to be taken forward, nurses, health care workers and all workers must make a decisive political break with the Democratic Party and the capitalist profit system it defends.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact