

Minnesota nurses' union offers to cut health benefits after sellout of Allina strike

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The now five-month long struggle of 4,800 nurses against concession demands by hospital chain Allina Health has entered a new stage. In the final day of recent negotiations last Friday, the Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA) union offered a new proposal to Allina Health, surrendering two of their current union-sponsored health care plans and raising the out-of-pocket costs for workers on the remaining two.

Nurses carried out a weeklong strike against Allina hospitals in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area last month after voting overwhelmingly to reject management's demands to replace union-sponsored plans with Allina's own substandard coverage. The MNA ordered 6,000 other Twins Cities area nurses to continue working and then shut down the Allina strike, sending nurses back to work without a contract on June 27.

Alongside a demand for a meager pay raise—10 percent over three years—the MNA's new proposal fails to address nurses' concerns about under-staffing and unsafe workloads.

The details of the new proposals include increasing co-pays from \$15 to \$20 for regular office visits and from \$40 to \$50 for emergency and combining the union plans into a common pool with the "core" plans Allina offered. The same deductible for Allina Health's first plan would be used for the remaining two union plans.

It is noteworthy that of the remaining two plans one of them only offers coverage in Allina hospitals while the other combines coverage for Allina hospitals and outside hospitals. These details paint a picture of the hated "company store" scenario where nurses will see their paychecks shrink to pay Allina for their own health coverage.

Allina responded to the MNA's capitulation with demands for deeper cuts on the remaining two plans. It

also insists that new nurses be barred from the union-sponsored plans. At the conclusion of the meeting, the MNA and Allina planned to meet again on August 1.

The offer is a complete sellout of nurses, which will only set the pattern for far more concessions not just in Minnesota but nationally. It confirms the warnings by the *World Socialist Web Site* about the treacherous role of the MNA and the National Nurses United (NNU) and the significance of their political subordination of health care workers to the Democratic Party and the cost-cutting campaign being spearheaded by the Obama administration.

Far from uniting health care workers in a serious struggle against the powerful corporate interests that dominate the health care industry, the NNU has called a series of impotent walkouts, which have been left deliberately isolated by the AFL-CIO and other unions. These strikes have largely been used to allow angry health care workers to let off steam while doing little or nothing to affect the revenue of the giant hospital chains.

The California-affiliate of the NNU called a four-day strike at Kaiser Permanente's Los Angeles Medical Center before sending the 1,300 nurses back without a contract. The NNU blocked a strike by nurses and reached last minute concessionary deals in Watsonville, California and at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

Nurses and other health care workers are being thrust into struggle because of the relentless attacks on their working conditions and living standards. This assault has been accelerated under Obama's misnamed Affordable Care Act (ACA), which has increased the number of insured patients while doing nothing to seriously address the critical shortage of nurses and other caregivers. Even before the implementation of

ACA, experts were predicting there would be a shortage of 500,000 nurses in the US by 2025.

Obamacare has also been used throughout every sector of the economy to shift health care costs from employers onto the backs of workers. The major health care companies see nurses' health care costs as a major obstacle to their efforts to slash costs and boost revenue.

In an effort to provide itself with a "left" cover, the MNA endorsed Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primary contest. The Sanders campaign turned out, just as the *World Socialist Web Site* had warned, to be a political trap for workers and young people, with Sanders endorsing Hillary Clinton, the favored candidate of the "billionaire class" who received, by far, the largest amount of campaign donations from the pharmaceutical monopolies.

Nurses' opposition to increased workloads, the gutting of health care, and the reduction of wages and overall living standards is part of a resurgence of open class conflict. In order to take their fight forward, Allina nurses must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the MNA and other unions, and for rank-and-file committees to unify all health care workers in a common battle. Above all what is needed is a new political strategy to mobilize the whole working class to fight for socialism so universal health care, provided on the basis of human need, not private profit, can be guaranteed to all as a basic social right.



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