

Minnesota nurses authorize open-ended strike against Allina

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Nurses at five hospitals in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota have once again overwhelmingly voted to reject Allina Health's demands for sweeping concessions. Nurses rejected the company's latest offer for a new three-year contract—which includes demands for increased out-of-pocket health insurance costs and dangerously high workloads—and voted instead to approve an open-ended walkout by 4,800 nurses against the Minneapolis-based hospital chain.

Ignoring the mandate of rank-and-file health care workers, the Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA) has not announced any strike date. Instead MNA officials have stepped up their appeals to hospital management to accept a “compromise” deal when talks resume Tuesday.

According to the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, “Union officials said they will begin planning for a strike, but expect that federal mediators or Allina might pursue another round of talks before any walkout begins.” The conciliation by the MNA has only made management more intransigent.

“It was disappointing to read that the focus of the union's meeting today was on planning a strike, rather than working on a solution,” Allina spokesman David Kanihan told the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* Saturday. “We look forward to hearing what the union's ideas are when we meet on Tuesday,” Kanihan said, adding that a health insurance agreement with the union would be “absolutely essential to reaching a contract and putting this behind us.”

The nurses' vote follows the limited one-week strike called by the MNA at the end of June. After the union shut down that walkout, the MNA offered to abandon two traditional union-backed health insurance plans. Allina officials responded by demanding that all additional costs for the remaining two plans be shifted

onto nurses in order to save \$10 million a year.

More than two-thirds of the members voted to reject the latest contract offer and authorize a strike, according to the MNA. Nurses say if they accept concessions now their previous walkout would have been for nothing.

The MNA has all but conceded the issue of increased workloads, which nurses still place at the forefront of their struggle. Nurses who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* on the day of the vote indicated that they were determined to reduce staffing ratios as well as protect health benefits.

A nurse who spoke with the WSWWS recalled the 2010 struggle, where an open-ended strike was authorized on the issue of safe staffing ratios by all 12,000 of the nurses represented by the MNA in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region. After the vote, nurses came under a deluge of criticism from the media and corporate establishment, which hypocritically slandered them for not caring about their patients.

After mass meetings were held where nurses expressed their determination to defeat the six hospital systems on this issue, the MNA met the companies behind the backs of the nurses and came to an agreement to head off an upcoming open-ended strike. The nurse characterized the overnight agreement by the MNA as “caving in” on these issues “the night before.”

Increasing workloads for nurses and other health care providers is a key tenet of the Obama administration's misnamed Affordable Care Act (ACA), popularly known as Obamacare, which is pressing hospital chains to cut costs. While servicing an increased number of insured patients, hospitals have not hired a corresponding number of nurses and others. The MNA and its parent organization, National Nurses United (NNU) are politically allied to Obama and have

endorsed his successor, Hillary Clinton. They are therefore determined to prevent any struggle by nurses that could quickly erupt into a political confrontation with the Democratic Party, particularly in an election year.

The MNA is begging Allina to hand it some cosmetic concession to sell to their increasingly restive members. However, the hospital officials have essentially responded by telling the MNA that the militancy of the nurses is the union's problem, not theirs. Having taken the measure of the MNA long ago, Allina Health executives and the powerful health care and financial interests that stand behind it are doubling down and demanding even further concessions.

Nurses are determined to fight and a stand taken by them would generate widespread support from health care workers and all workers. The biggest obstacle to such a struggle, however, is the MNA, the NNU and the AFL-CIO and the Change to Win labor federations that are allied with the Democrats and support capitalism and the system of for-profit medicine.

If nurses are to move their courageous struggle forward they must take the conduct of this fight into their own hands by electing rank-and-file committees to monitor all negotiations and to prepare opposition to whatever sellout agreement is reached by the MNA or a so-called independent mediator. At the same time these committees must reach out to all health care workers throughout the Twin Cities area and nationally to prepare a genuine struggle to defend jobs and living standards and protect patient safety.

A powerful counteroffensive on the industrial level must be combined with a political struggle to unite every section of the working class against both big-business parties and the capitalist system they defend.



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