

As Minneapolis nurses strike, unions join arms with Democratic officials in Labor Day events

Patrick Martin
6 September 2016

Labor Day 2016 began with a major struggle by the American working class, as nearly 5,000 nurses in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area walked out at 7 a.m. Central Time, in an open-ended strike against five hospitals owned by the Allina chain. The hospital management provoked the walkout by demanding the gutting of healthcare for the nurses, who themselves play a critical role in providing health services for hundreds of thousands of patients.

Allina CEO Penny Wheeler has recruited 1,500 strikebreakers. She claims that these will be enough to provide a safe level of service, a statement that demonstrates her contempt for both the hard work done by 5,000 nurses, and the intelligence of the public. Executive compensation at Allina, divvied up by Wheeler and a few other top officers, comes to more than \$12 million, enough to pay the salaries of 200 full-time nurses.

The strike began despite desperate efforts the nurses' union, the Minnesota Nurses Association, to prevent it. The MNA carried out a walkout in June that was limited to one week and ended without obtaining any concessions from the hospital. The union also called in a federal mediator in an effort to engineer a deal, but the hospital management has been intransigent in its demands for cuts in health care and further increases in workload for the nurses, based on the cost-cutting provisions of Obamacare.

According to a report by the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, in the final hours of bargaining, the union agreed to the main hospital demand, the termination of four union-backed health plans, with all nurses to be switched over to Allina's in-house corporate health plan. However, the hospital refused to accept any limit

to cuts in benefits under the plan or on the premiums nurses would be required to pay. One member of the bargaining committee told the newspaper she was more worried about how rank-and-file nurses would react to the deal, and was "shocked" when Allina negotiators rejected it.

While the Minneapolis nurses were setting an example of militancy and determination for the whole working class, the unions—anti-working class organizations that function as auxiliary arms of the corporations and the state—were deepening their prostration before the capitalist politicians of the Democratic Party.

Labor Day parades and rallies in New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois and many other states were turned into vote-hustling operations, with top officials of the AFL-CIO unions applauding representatives of the campaign of Hillary Clinton, the consensus candidate of Wall Street, the military-intelligence apparatus and most of the political establishment.

In return, the top Democrats paid tribute to the union officials, who have been engaged in systematic sabotage of the struggles of workers in every industry and occupation.

Hillary Clinton appeared in Cleveland, Ohio with AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, whose services to the coal bosses as president of the United Mine Workers (UMW) reduced a million coal miners and ex-miners to poverty, turned the UMW into an empty shell and vaulted Trumka into a well-paid leadership position in the labor federation.

Joining them was Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, who has worked

systematically to block struggles by rank-and-file teachers in cities like Detroit and Chicago, against cuts in jobs, wages and benefits imposed by local Democratic Party administrations. Teachers in many cities are working without a contract as schools open, as the unions seek to prevent any class battle that could disrupt the Democrats' November 8 election campaign.

In Pittsburgh, Clinton's running-mate Timothy Kaine and Vice President Joe Biden were joined by Leo Gerard, head of the United Steel Workers, which has waged a year-long campaign against workers in the basic steel industry, isolating workers at Allegheny Technologies (ATI) who were locked out for many months, and forcing through contracts for workers at USX and ArcelorMittal.

In Detroit, former president Bill Clinton hobnobbed with leaders of the United Auto Workers, who last year rammed through concessions contracts at GM, Ford and FCA against mass opposition. The contracts kept labor costs below the rate of inflation, further divided auto workers among multiple lower-paid "tiers", and gave the auto bosses a free hand to cut jobs and close plants.

The Democrats utilize the collaboration of the unions to impose cuts in jobs, wages and benefits on workers, and browbeat workers into voting for Democratic candidates. In return, the union officials receive positions on corporate boards, control of multi-billion-dollar slush funds like the UAW Retiree Medical Benefit Trust, and other payoffs.

Labor Day is also the occasion for the release of studies and reports documenting the ongoing decline of working-class living standards and social benefits, a direct consequence of the transformation of the unions into corporate-controlled business entities. This year is no exception.

A report issued by Project Time Off, which documents the decline of vacation, holiday and other paid leave for working people, found, "Americans are taking less vacation and more work home. Some are even working this Labor Day." The average annual vacation time has fallen from three weeks, during the 1970-2000 period, to just over two weeks by 2015. Some 41 percent of Americans didn't take a single vacation day in 2015, and as many as a third had to work on federal holidays, including Labor Day itself.

The cumulative effect of vacation days that workers

are entitled to but do not use is even more staggering. As the report detailed, American workers left 658 million vacation days unused in 2015—the equivalent of 1.6 million full-time jobs. Even worse, 222 million of these vacation days could not be rolled over or otherwise paid, and so were forfeited: the equivalent of \$61.4 billion pocketed by employers at the workers' expense.

This is only one of myriad figures documenting the systematic attack on the living standards of working people in America. A few recent examples:

? Median household incomes declined from \$57,724 in 2000 to \$53,657 in 2014

? One in seven Americans, some 46 million people, rely on food pantries and other charitable programs to feed their families.

? In New York City, the site of Wall Street and the largest concentration of wealth on the planet, there are an average of 60,000 people homeless, including 23,000 homeless children, on any given night.

? The percentage of men aged 25 to 54, the prime working years, who are employed is at an all-time low, while the percentage of those over 55 years old who are working is higher than at any time since the introduction of Social Security.

Most of these reports document the ongoing deterioration of the conditions of the working class as a result of the policies of the Obama administration. The assault on workers will continue after the November elections, whether it is Clinton or Republican Donald Trump who occupies the White House.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact