Allina nurses strike reveals gulf between workers and union

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6 September 2016

The 4,800 nurses at five Allina hospitals in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro region walked off their jobs September 5 on an open-ended strike determined to preserve healthcare and fight for safe staffing ratios. Workers from other unions such as teachers, government workers and communications workers joined nurses on the picket line.

After nearly eight months of negotiations and a week-long strike in June, Allina remains determined as ever to terminate the union's four healthcare plans and force all nurses onto its own corporate plan, placing the burden of rising healthcare costs on the backs of nurses. The company has also refused to entertain any compromise on safe staffing to ensure quality care for patients, or to provide a safe working environment for nurses who find themselves on the front lines of dealing with mental health cases.

One nurse with 10 years at Allina's United Health Hospital in St. Paul told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "In the beginning of our contract negotiations with Allina, I think some of us felt that it was logical to try to compromise. We recognized the changing face of health insurance and healthcare across the country.

"But as the negotiations—or the lack thereof—went on, I began to see things differently, especially Allina's unwillingness to take some of our concessions and compromise with us. Now it feels a lot more like Allina is engaged in union busting, attempting to dismantle or divide the union."

These sentiments are developing widely among nurses and have resulted in the overwhelming rejection of three Allina contract proposals. Nurses are convinced that their only recourse is an indefinite strike. But there is the sharpest contrast between the determination of the nurses and the retreat by their union, the Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA).

At a noon press conference on the strike's first day, MNA Executive Director Rose Roach told the assembled reporters, "We did compromise... as difficult as it was—and I can't even stress how difficult it was—to say we were willing to do a transition into their health plans … and that wasn't enough for them.

"We've already walked away from staffing ratios," said Roach, and "we even made a compromise on their language about the charge nurses."

When a reporter asked what would be different about the current strike compared to the week-long strike in June, Roach replied, "We hope it will be different." More than once during the course of the press conference officials intoned that nurses did not want to be on strike. In reality, the labor bureaucracy is bemoaning the fact that they were not able to prevent the strike.

Traditionally, MNA nurses in the Twin Cities used to negotiate jointly with all six hospital chains. But this year, Allina, by far the largest, broke away to negotiate independently. The MNA leadership played into Allina's hands by rapidly signing contracts covering 6,000 nurses at the other five hospital chains.

There is a growing recognition by some striking nurses that this weakened the position of Allina nurses. One nurse told the WSWS, "I was here during the 2010 negotiations when all the nurses in the Twin Cities were united. Today, instead of 15,000 nurses out, we only have 5,000."

When asked how she thought the strike could be won, she replied, "What is critical is for the nurses to stand strong, and long enough, so that the public recognizes we are serious and we want to help our patients. And we have to be united to the point where Allina won't be able to withstand our strength. Then other workers will wake up and realize that we count and they can

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benefit from supporting our struggle.

"What people need to understand in our case is that US Bank and other companies that are tied to the Allina board of directors are getting rich off of healthcare. Millions of dollars. And at the same time, Allina is telling us they don't have enough money to meet our needs. But I think this is common throughout corporate America today.

"I want other workers to know we are not nitpicking over contract issues. The issues are the same for workers everywhere. What's going on today is truly a struggle between all workers and corporate America."

The opening day strike coincided with Labor Day, an event that used to draw hundreds of thousands of workers together in cities across the country. But the bureaucrats of the Minnesota AFL-CIO and other unions only turned out token delegations, mostly comprised of the bureaucrats themselves.

The labor officials and the MNA, unable to break down the insistence of nurses to defend past gains, are worried that their strike over healthcare and working conditions could potentially draw widespread support and ignite a movement against the corporate and banking elite in the midst of the national election campaign. It is for this reason that the bureaucracy is seeking to isolate the nurses from broad sections of workers who face a similar struggle over healthcare issues.

MNA President Mary Turner alluded to this in answer to a question during the press conference, saying, "Our labor friends are going to be helping us." Turner was not referring to the millions of workers but to the labor bureaucracy. Turner in the same breath also mentioned "our political friends," referring to the Democratic Party politicians. Nurses will find that these "labor" and "political" friends will in no way aid their struggle. In fact, these so-called friends will only function to hinder it.

In order to avoid the suffocation of their strike by the labor bureaucracy, Allina nurses must elect rank-and-file strike committees to direct the struggle. Above all, they must appeal directly to the working class in the Twin Cities and throughout Minnesota, tapping into the great discontent of the American working class and mobilize it in defense of the right to healthcare for all workers.

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