

SEP presidential candidate discusses elections with striking Minnesota nurses

Our reporting team
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Striking nurses at Allina Health Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis, Minnesota gave a warm welcome to Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Jerry White when he visited their picket line on Sunday afternoon. White expressed his solidarity with the striking nurses and explained how the fight to defend the right to health care required a socialist alternative to the for-profit health care system.

Nearly 5,000 nurses have been on strike at five hospitals in the St. Paul-Minneapolis area since Labor Day, September 5. They are opposing the hospital chain's demands for sweeping health care concessions—which will include sharply higher out-of-pocket costs—and dangerously high patient-to-nurse ratios.

White spoke with nurses right after arriving in the Twin Cities, where he will be campaigning ahead of a public meeting at the University of Minnesota on Tuesday night.

The Minnesota Nurses Association was forced to call the strike even after it conceded to the company's major demands to replace four traditional union health care plans with a corporate plan. MNA officials, along with a federal mediator, tried to get some type of cosmetic concession from the company in order to sell the deal to the nurses but corporate management refused.

The board of directors of the so-called nonprofit company includes top executives from agribusiness giant General Mills and US Bank, the latter which is extracting millions in debt payments from Allina. Corporate management is looking to squeeze \$10 million a year in cost savings from the nurses even as it spares no expense to hire strikebreakers to replace the embattled nurses.

“How can they be nonprofit and make all this

money?” Tina, a striking nurse asked White. “All throughout the country they are getting away with this. It's got to stop.” She added, “There's not a winner on either side,” referring to the Democratic and Republican candidates.

As a half-dozen strikers gathered around White to discuss these issues, he said both Clinton and Trump were committed to shoveling even more money into the hands of the financial aristocracy by accelerating the attack on health and pension benefits. He pointed to Clinton's first efforts at health care “reform” in the 1990s, which were the basis of Obama's misnamed Affordable Care Act.

“While Obamacare was presented as a step towards universal health care,” he said, “in fact it was drafted by the giant insurance, pharmaceutical and hospital monopolies to defend their profits. It has shifted health costs from the employers and the government onto workers and at the same time led to an ever-greater exploitation of health care workers,” White said.

A patient who came onto the picket line with his Intravenous Drip said, “I support the nurses who have treated me for years. I've had five operations here. This is the richest country in the world and there should be socialized medicine. But neither candidate is for the people.

“Here in the United States people work very hard and we're having to work harder because the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. People should be rewarded for their hard work with socialized medicine.”

Another striking nurse said, “I drive 70 miles to work so I can get the health care plan. My husband is not well and Allina wants to control the health plan so they could review coverage four times a year in order to change and reduce the care.”

Referring to the profit-driven character of the health industry, she said, “Medical care has always been rationed out because it is a capitalistic system. It has always been a two- or three-tier system depending how much money you have. The hospital chains want to get the patients out of the beds as soon as possible to get more patients in and more money.”

The MNA is opposed to any mobilization of health care workers to defeat Allina. It has kept another 7,000 nurses on the job at six other Twin Cities area hospitals even though their employers will impose similar attacks on them if the Allina strike is defeated.

Earlier in the day, a nurse at Hennepin County Hospital told White, “I support the Allina nurses and think we should all be together. Allina wants to take away so much from the people who work the hardest for them. Nursing is a physical and emotional job. We provide health care and we should be healthy enough to take care of our patients.”

Speaking to a group of Abbott Northwestern nurses, White said, “Sometimes it is difficult for nurses or other public sector workers like teachers and firefighters who are so dedicated to the public to fully appreciate that the financial interests that dominate society do not in any shape or form share their compassion for human beings.

“On the contrary, they look at patients as units, like school children in public schools that are being privatized. They really believe that people are living too long after retirement and they want to reduce life expectancy in order to grab their pensions and health benefits. And now these same corporate and financial criminals—backed by Trump and Clinton—want new wars in order to grab more profits.”

White explained that the MNA’s promotion of the Democrats and their “corporate campaign” to appeal to the conscience of banking executives was worse than useless. The MNA and its parent union, the National Nurses United, are allied with the Democratic Party and participated in the political fraud of the Bernie Sanders campaign in order to contain opposition within the Democratic Party and smother it.

White urged nurses to take the battle into their own hands and fight to mobilize all hospital workers in the Twin Cities in joint action, referring to the great 1934 general strike in Minneapolis led by the Trotskyist movement. The SEP, he said, was running in the

elections to build a mass political and socialist movement to put an end to capitalism, nationalize the banks and health care industry and put an end to war and inequality.

Jen, another nurse at Abbott, said nurses “are no different than other people who work for wages—we don’t have yachts and all the things executives and bankers have.” Expressing her support for the SEP’s call for mobilizing the entire working class behind Allina nurses, she said, “Absolutely, health care is an issue for the general working class, and we’re not just fighting for us, we are fighting for everyone.”

Referring to the union’s promotion of the Democratic Party, Jen said, “I saw through [US Congressman] Keith Ellison and the other Democratic party politicians from the beginning. When there’s a camera on them, they’ll sing about solidarity, but what is it all about for them? Money and self-promotion.”



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