

Minnesota nurses strike at critical juncture

Our reporting team
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The strike by nearly 5,000 nurses at Allina Health hospitals in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area of Minnesota has entered its second week.

The struggle has reached a critical juncture. Nurses have demonstrated their determination to beat back Allina's attack on their healthcare benefits and dangerously increase their workloads. In the face of the company strikebreaking operation and slanders by the corporate-controlled media, the vast majority of nurses remain militant and defiant.

The Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA) and the AFL-CIO and Change to Win labor federations, however, have left the embattled nurses to fight alone. The MNA has ordered some 7,000 members at seven area hospitals to remain on the job even though their employers will quickly follow suit if Allina defeats the strike.

Meanwhile, the MNA has repeatedly capitulated to the company's major demands. On September 3, two days before the strike, the MNA agreed to abandon four union healthcare plans and "transition" nurses to three company medical schemes, which would erode coverage and impose higher out-of-pocket costs on nurses.

According to Monday's *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, after agreeing to management's key demand, MNA "negotiators requested that a hand-picked actuary be able to review the Allina plans each year to make sure their benefit values don't decline by 5 percent or more without the union's consent."

While the MNA has cynically claimed its surrender was a brilliant tactical maneuver—aimed at exposing how unreasonable corporate management is—the reality is that the MNA has already sanctioned the destruction of nurses' health benefits. The MNA executives only want a "seat at table" so it can grant its "consent" to cuts of 5 percent or more.

Nurses are determined to defend health benefits. A

nurse at United Hospital told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Penny Wheeler says her first concern is patients. That's completely false. If it was, she would settle with us. Instead, Allina is going to spend \$40 million, \$60 million or \$80 million on replacement nurses depending on how long this strike lasts.

"Allina says they will save \$10 million if we give up our healthcare, and that they will put that into patient care. I don't believe that. We've heard Wheeler makes \$900,000 a year, and she reportedly got a \$1.6 million bonus last year. Allina paid out \$43 million overall to the top executives at Allina.

"Wheeler lives in a \$2 million house down in Eagan. I live in a three-bedroom rambler with a mortgage. My husband is retired with a heart condition. All these pills and tests cost money. I need my MNA healthcare plan."

Well aware of the resistance they would confront from rank-and-file nurses if they brought back a rotten deal, the MNA called the strike. While management has demonstrated a ruthless determination to achieve its cost-cutting aims, however, the MNA is organizing pathetic appeals to the conscience of the multi-millionaire executives on Allina's board of directors, while parading various false friends, including Democratic Party politicians like Congressman Keith Ellison, before the nurses.

Aiding the MNA executives is the pseudo-left group, Socialist Alternative, whose members hold influential positions inside the union. The SA has helped the MNA and its parent union, National Nurses United, perpetuate the fraud that the Democratic Party can be pressured into defending the working class. They joined the MNA in promoting Bernie Sanders, who is now campaigning for the warmonger and Wall Street shill Hillary Clinton.

In Minneapolis, the SA is currently campaigning for the City Council to adopt a \$15 minimum wage

provision. Such a raise would leave thousands of workers in poverty. Moreover, such provisions passed in Seattle and elsewhere are aimed at reviving the credibility of the Democrats and the unions, and more often than not include a loophole that allows employers to escape paying the minimum wage if they agree to a union contract.

The nurses' struggle raises important political questions before the whole working class. Allina nurses are fighting not just one particularly ruthless boss. Standing behind CEO Penny Wheeler are giant corporate and financial interests, including General Mills and US Bank, as well as the Obama administration and the entire political establishment. All of these forces want to shift the cost of healthcare from the employers and the government to the backs of working people, while funneling even more money into the for-profit healthcare business.

Over the last two days, nurses have warmly greeted Socialist Equality Party (SEP) presidential candidate Jerry White on their picket lines. Nurses are looking for a way to fight, and like tens of millions of other workers and young people, they are asking about socialism.

On the eve of his public meeting at the University of Minnesota, the SEP candidate issued the following statement expressing his solidarity with the striking nurses and calling for the full mobilization of the working class behind their struggle.

"The Allina nurses are standing up for all workers. Their enemies may be powerful but their potential allies are far more powerful. Millions of workers across the country—in the public and private sector—are facing an assault on healthcare benefits, along with their wages and pensions.

"While Obamacare was sold to the public as a progressive reform, it was drafted by the insurance, pharmaceutical and hospital monopolies to boost their profits and squeeze even more work out of already overburdened healthcare workers. Regardless who wins the elections—Clinton or Trump—the attack on the social right to medical care will be accelerated.

"To rally the maximum support for their struggle, rank-and-file nurses must take the initiative in their own hands. Like the socialists who led the great Minneapolis General Strike in 1934, they must turn out to the broadest sections of workers—first of all at area

hospitals—to expand the strike and transform it into a counter-offensive of the entire working class to break the economic and political stranglehold of the financial aristocracy and their servants in both big business parties.

"As a socialist, I call for the ill-gotten gains of the corporate and financial elites to be seized and for a radical redistribution of wealth. Profit must be taken out of medicine by nationalizing the giant insurance, pharmaceutical and hospital companies under the democratic control and collective ownership of the working class in order to guarantee universal healthcare to all as part of a socialist, planned economy.

"All of the struggles of the working class—against attacks on wages and benefits, and against war, police killings and other forms of state repression—must be united in one common struggle, through the building of a mass political movement of the working class whose aim is to replace the bankrupt capitalist system with socialism."



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