

Allina nurses' strike and the union's fraudulent "corporate campaign"

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As the strike by 4,800 nurses at five Allina hospitals in the Twin Cities metro area enters its third week, striking nurses must make a sober assessment of the "corporate campaign" launched by the Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA).

The campaign has targeted members of the Allina board of directors who represent companies such as US Bank, the financial firm Piper Jaffray, General Mills and Buffalo Wild Wings, and seeks to "pressure" them into compelling Allina to settle the strike. The MNA has variously described the campaign to these corporate executives "to make sure that these decision-makers are accountable to the community they are supposed to serve," "to start a public conversation," and "to do the right thing."

The campaign is a diversion that seeks to create the illusion that these corporate sharks have morals that can be activated through public shaming. After decades of corporate downsizing, destruction of working conditions, wages and benefits that have created a vast gulf between the working class and the tiny layer of capitalist elites, does the MNA bureaucracy think that nurses will believe that these corporate executives can be convinced to forgo their class interests and talk sense to Allina CEO Penny Wheeler and the negotiating team? If anything, Wheeler and the Allina negotiating team are the puppets of Piper Jaffray and US Bank.

The "corporate campaign" is not something new, but rather something that has been dusted off from the 1980s. That decade was inaugurated by the Reagan administration's breaking of the air traffic controllers' strike that saw firing of 11,000 workers, the illegalization of the union, and several strike leaders sent to prison. The AFL-CIO Executive Council, which was meeting at the time, refused to take any action in

defense of the PATCO strikers despite widespread sentiment among rank-and-file workers for a national general strike expressed in the march of half a million workers in Washington, DC on September 19, 1981.

The AFL-CIO faced a number of semi-insurrections against its policy of isolating and sabotaging workers' struggles as the union bureaucracy integrated itself into the structure of corporate management. In an effort to undermine the growing class consciousness of workers and block a unified struggle of the working class that would disrupt its relations with the corporations and the Democratic Party, the AFL-CIO sought to channel the anger of workers into impotent and meaningless publicity stunts, including protests to CEOs and consumer boycotts.

During that period, the announcement by union leaders of a corporate campaign was the kiss of death to any real struggle. The windy speeches by labor leaders and Democrats against CEOs were well understood by the corporate elite as necessary to deflate the class struggle, all the better to draw strikes out, wear down workers, and continue production with strikebreakers. In the end, strike after strike was defeated.

One of the high points of the rebellions against the labor bureaucracy occurred during the 1985-86 strike by packinghouse workers at the Hormel plant in Austin, Minnesota. Again and again, the rank-and-file fought back against the company agents in the union's national leadership of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), which used every dirty trick in the bureaucracy's playbook to impose management's concessions.

Workers, of whom many were related to the earlier generation of Austin meatpackers who carried out the first sit-down strike in the country, revived tactics of their parents and grandparents. They appealed to

workers across the United States who journeyed to Austin or sent financial contributions. They dispatched groups of strikers to other meatpacking plants resulting in sympathy strikes by those workers. They launched mass picketing outside the plant to bar the entry of scabs.

But there were two weaknesses in that struggle. The union adopted a corporate campaign that created widespread confusion and diverted workers. It created illusions in a consumer boycott that was touted as a way of pressuring the CEO, executive board, and Hormel's main financial backer—FirstBank—to concede to the demands of the workers. The second great shortcoming was illusions in sections of the Democratic Party. In the end, DFL Governor Rudy Perpich played a decisive role in defeating the strike by sending the National Guard to Austin.

The UFCW put the local into trusteeship, removed its elected leaders and then disbanded the local only to set up a new one based on the scabs hired by Hormel.

It is no different today at Allina. The MNA, unable to convince a majority of nurses to accept Allina's conditions for a settlement, are seeking to carry through the same policy as that of the 1980s.

Nurses must begin from the fact that the great division in the United States and across the globe is between the millions and millions of workers on one side, and a tiny layer of millionaires and billionaires on the other. Can the MNA leaders, who have concocted this campaign, point to any example where this capitalist elite has, of its own volition, surrendered its wealth for the betterment of the working class?

Those socialist and left-wing workers who pioneered the labor movement in the 1930s understood clearly that the concessions made by the corporations and the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt only came through the broadest mobilization of the working class in battles that threatened to paralyze the capitalist system unless a limited retreat was made. This included the great Minneapolis General Strike of 1934, led by the Trotskyist movement.

The MNA began 2016 by first settling contracts with the other five hospital systems, thus isolating Allina nurses. It paraded over 100 DFL politicians on picket lines to create a false image of support to nurses. It sought to cover its policy by endorsing Bernie Sanders, who spoke of a “political revolution” against the

“billionaire class,” only to endorse the billionaires' favored candidate, Hillary Clinton.

Sanders' letter of “support” the previous week to Allina nurses was a pathetic last straw seeking to squeeze whatever illusions in his campaign might be left.

Nurses must draw the necessary conclusion. Their real allies are the tens of thousands of workers throughout the Twin Cities. Nurses should elect rank-and-file committees to send delegations throughout Minneapolis and St. Paul and across the state to build support in the working class against Allina and the corporate and political forces that stand behind it.



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