

Minnesota nurses' union seeks to ram through concessions contract

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The Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA) announced early Tuesday morning that it had reached an agreement with Allina Health and was pulling down picket lines prior to a shot-gun ratification vote to be held on Thursday. The MNA is seeking as quickly as possible to end the six-week-long strike of 4,800 nurses on the basis of a concessions contract that accepts all the main demands of Allina.

The announcement of the agreement comes after the intervention of Minnesota's Democratic Party governor, Mark Dayton, into the contract negotiations. On Monday, Dayton called for the negotiating parties to meet at the governor's mansion to quickly reach a deal. This was a political decision by the Democratic Party to end the strike, with the MNA now tasked with trying to push it through in one way or another.

Nurses should reject this agreement with the contempt that it deserves. The MNA is seeking to repackage a contract that in all essentials is identical to what nurses have already voted down four times. In particular, it would transition nurses out of their current health care plans and onto costlier plans controlled by Allina. It would also lay the foundation for increasing the workload of nurses.

To try to sell the agreement, the union is trumpeting a few cosmetic changes, including a \$500 contribution to a "health savings account" for nurses who decide to switch to Allina's health care plans in the next year—that is, a miserly incentive for nurses to have their health care cut. On top of this, it states that the MNA representatives will be appointed to a health insurance committee that will oversee any benefit cuts that the hospital system decides to make in the future.

The contract has the unanimous support of the MNA. Rose Roach, the executive director of the union, declared that it contains "improvements in workplace

safety, nurse staffing policies, and multi-year contributions to accounts that will ease their transition from their contract health insurance plans to Allina core plans." This is so much hot air.

The union said it would "terminate" the strike the same day as the tentative agreement and has already taken down picket lines. This is meant to demobilize the nurses to create better conditions for the contract to be pushed through. The agreement also states that the nurses will return to work promptly "following the ratification." In the language of this agreement, the MNA writes as if the ratification has already happened.

The announcement of the tentative deal was met with anger by nurses and their supporters. One nurse wrote on Facebook, "How is this proposal different from the one we voted against?" Another nurse rejected the tentative agreement, writing, "What was the purpose of the past 6 weeks then? As for that 'we will form a committee' proposal...that whole ploy has been proven to be bogus, full of empty promises, contract after contract." Some nurses raised concerns that the vote would be manipulated to ensure passage.

Nurses want to expand the struggle, but the experience of the strike, culminating in the agreement announced yesterday, demonstrates that a serious fight cannot be waged within the framework of the MNA.

Even before the strike was called, the MNA had agreed to all of Allina's main demands. Facing the determination of nurses to resist these demands, the union was forced to call a strike, but it has sought throughout to create the conditions for getting the deal through.

The striking nurses have been completely isolated. The MNA rushed through wage-only contracts at five other hospitals in the area and ordered the 6,000 nurses who work at them to stay on the job. Nurses were

strung out without strike pay and on October 1 faced the cutoff of all their health care benefits. As for the AFL-CIO, it did nothing to mobilize broader support from workers facing the same attack on jobs and benefits.

The isolation of the strike was coupled with publicity stunts aimed at demoralizing the nurses, such as a corporate campaign appealing to the corporate executives on Allina's board of directors and the Democratic Party.

The actions of the MNA make clear once again that the unions are not working class organizations. They function as an arm of corporate management and the state. Their political alliance with the Democratic Party is aimed at securing the position of the union apparatus itself at the expense of the workers they claim to represent.

In particular, the MNA has been desperate to prevent the nurses' struggle from developing into a political conflict with the Obama administration and the Democratic Party, particularly with only one month until the US presidential elections. Yet the actions of Alina are entirely in line with the overall attack on health care, supported by both Democrats and Republicans, and spearheaded by the Obama administration's misnamed Affordable Care Act (ACA). The basic aim of Obamacare has been to transfer health care costs from corporations and the state onto workers, while at the same time increasing the workload of already understaffed nurses.

The MNA sought to give a "left" cover for itself and the Democrats by incorporating members of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative into its bargaining committee and endorsing Bernie Sanders for president. Sanders's campaign was a political trap for the working class, channeling opposition to the policies of the ruling class back into the Democratic Party and support for Clinton, who will only escalate the vast transfer of wealth to the rich overseen by Obama. Sanders, a "friend" of the nurses according to the MNA, made absolutely no mention of the strike in his visit to Minneapolis last Tuesday. He instead declared that the only task of his supporters should be to get Clinton elected.

A determined struggle by nurses would have enormous support in the working class as a whole, which the unions are seeking to prevent. The same day that the MNA announced an agreement in Minneapolis,

the Chicago Teachers Union declared it had reached a deal with Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, calling off a possible strike by Chicago teachers. Unifor, formerly the Canadian Auto Workers, also announced it had reached an agreement with Fiat Chrysler to avert a strike across the border against attacks on jobs and working conditions.

The WSWs calls on nurses to reject the sellout contract and combine this rejection with a political mobilization of the working class in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area and beyond. Delegations of nurses should be sent out to workplaces, universities and schools to appeal for broader support.

Nurses are facing a political battle. The fight for the most basic social rights—a secure and good paying job, safe working conditions and quality health care and a pension—pits workers against the entire capitalist system, which subordinates the social needs of the working class to the accumulation of wealth by the corporate and financial oligarchy. The ruling capitalist class of America controls both political parties, the Democrats and Republicans.



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