

Minnesota nurses oppose retaliation over demands for protective equipment

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Hundreds of nurses and other workers from across the Minneapolis and St. Paul metro region rallied at the Minnesota State Capitol May 20 to protest a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) for hospital workers and the firings of two union stewards who opposed the unsafe conditions at United Hospital in St. Paul. The rally evinced a deep anger over the utter indifference of corporate management to the plight of hospital workers.

Health care workers first assembled in front of United Hospital, owned by Allina Healthcare, and then marched to the State Capitol wearing masks and observing social distancing. In front of the Capitol, several speakers vented against management, calling them out by name, over many issues.

One speaker pointed out that “the first letter we sent to Allina Hospital, and everybody else, about the coronavirus and protecting our workers was on January 28 ... and four months later, we still don’t have the PPE we need.”

Leif Thorsgaard, a nurse in the emergency department at United, told the rally that the health care system “failed to prepare for a public health crisis.” He said, “The hospital industry exerted lobbying pressure on the CDC [Centers for Disease Control] to relax safety guidelines. Because of these relaxed guidelines, hospitals now have less pressure to secure adequate levels of PPE. When questioned by health care workers, the hospitals state they follow the guidelines set forth by the CDC, the very guidelines that were eroded due to pressure from the hospital system.”

“This is a call to action,” he said. “I am calling on us to return to the time of ‘best practice’ and not possible adequate practice. If we are to reopen our economy, we must first be willing to reinstate the utmost of safety measures, because safety is non-negotiable.

“I am willing to give my life for this job. It is a calling that is at the core of me. But I am not willing to be harmed or die, because decision-makers based their choices on percentages and not on the lives and safety of their employees, their patients and their communities.”

Referring to Allina corporate management, Thorsgaard charged, “These are the people who work from home where they are allowed to social distance and have never looked in the eyes of a COVID patient drowning in their own lungs.

“These people, who are okay with staff using masks over and over, balk at the idea of stockpiling N95 because expired equipment is money down the drain. We are standing at a pivotal moment in history. It is a time where the entire world stands together against a common enemy. We don’t want to be heroes. We want to safely do our job and not spread this disease.”

Zetella Caauwe, a veteran United Hospital nurse in the emergency department and a Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA) steward, who

is being threatened by management, told the rally, “I am likely to be the third steward fired. I have my next disciplinary meeting for wearing the hospital-issued scrubs on Friday. My discipline is progressive. And in all likelihood, I won’t have a job by next week, because I’m standing up.

“They have a clear pattern over the years, of not caring about their nurses, not keeping their nurses safe. Not keeping many of their frontline workers safe. We are disposable to them and I say that we are not. None of us, not any of us.

“Allina, like all health systems, has known that a pandemic was likely to come. There have been reports for over 15 years. And some of those reports even tell them how much PPE they should have been stockpiling. But that would be inconvenient. It would cost them money, and they’re into making money at the risk of my life.

“It is shameful. And I’m done. I will continue to wear the hospital-issued scrubs so that I’m not taking contaminated scrubs home to my family.”

Cliff Willmeng, a Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA) steward who works in the United Hospital emergency room, was the first worker fired for reporting hospital violations of safety standards and defending multiple nurses who were speaking out about the lack of PPE in the hospital.

Willmeng denounced Kelly Johnson, the emergency department manager, for a series of complaints and the harassment of nurses. He also criticized United Hospital President Sara Criger. “We have charged her with overseeing of retaliatory measures, including the firing of two MNA stewards. As a punitive measure, we decided she should be subject to removal from all health care decision-making and transferred to housekeeping duties on the COVID unit of United Hospital.”

Willmeng closed by targeting Allina CEO Penny Wheeler, whose 2018 compensation was \$2.5 million, “For blindly leading thousands of front-line workers into impossible working conditions with little or no PPE; for overseeing the attacks on union nurses forcing the 2016 MNA strike; and for using the Allina Healthcare system as her personal cash-cow and a source of wealth generation.”

Monica Norberg, a neuro intensive care unit (ICU) nurse now serving in the COVID unit, told the rally she had been a nurse for almost four years. “In those four years I have been in good standing the entire time without any warnings or disciplinary action against me until May 18 this past Monday, when I was terminated for doing virtual, mandatory education at home.”

Norberg explained the bogus character of the charge. The library where virtual education is done is in the direct path for transfer of

patients to the COVID ICU. She pointed out that the state government's stay-at-home order legally justified doing virtual education from home. "I made management aware that they were directly violating the stay-at-home order," said Norberg.

"I work in the COVID unit mainly, so any chance that I have of not exposing myself means that one day I may be able to see my family again. I may be able to hug my mom. With the current policies that they have in place, I can't do that."

Norberg made clear the retaliatory character of her termination by United: "I was actually elected an MNA steward for the COVID ICU at the neuro ICU. That was just six days before I was terminated.

"Before I became steward, I voiced multiple safety concerns to management since the beginning of the pandemic and prior to it—from education policy to PPE shortages to staffing concerns."

The victimization of the union stewards is aimed at silencing all health care workers. Workers should demand their reinstatement and an end to all retaliation. However, it has been the long collaboration of the Minnesota Nurses Association, National Nurses United (NNU) and other unions with austerity measures imposed by corporations and both big business parties that have left nurses and other health care workers particularly vulnerable in the current crisis.

Kera Peterson, president of the St. Paul Labor Federation, lamely appealed to the employers, saying, "People who don't have safe work conditions and take action shouldn't be punished by their employers." A spokeswoman for National Nurses United had little to add and, of course, said nothing about the union's support for Obama who used his so-called health reform to incentivize hospitals to slash staffing and increase the exploitation of health care workers. In addition, just like Trump, Obama did nothing to stockpile ventilators and PPE despite warnings from scientists about impending pandemics.

Democratic State Senator Jeff Hayden, who was invited by the unions to speak, demagogically declared, "We look forward to being strong partners to ensuring that nurses everywhere have the protection they need." He did not explain why they did not have it during the past four months.

Neither labor officials nor Hayden mentioned or even alluded to President Trump and his criminal policies or to his challenger, former Vice President Joe Biden. Nor did the union officials say a word about Bernie Sanders, long promoted by the NNU, who once again packed it in and supported the chosen candidate of Wall Street and the Pentagon, Biden.

Normally, the labor bureaucracy, especially in a presidential election year, would have loaded the rally with Democratic politicians stumping to obtain or maintain their positions. But both parties are implicated in ignoring early warnings of the pandemic, concealing the threat in its early stages and even cashing in stock portfolios to avoid getting caught in the initial panic on the stock market. Now both parties are engaged in a reckless campaign of reopening the economy and loosening social distance measures, despite scientific warnings that this will result in a surge in the number of infections and preventable deaths.

In Minnesota, Democratic Governor Tim Walz, who initially warned against an early opening of businesses, has joined the back-to-work crusade, even though early COVID-19 outbreaks occurred at meatpacking companies in Minnesota like JBS and Pilgrim's Pride.

A further foreshadowing of the storm to come was the \$5.5 million purchase in early May by the state of Minnesota of a 71,000-square-foot cold storage facility to store bodies when mortuary facilities are overwhelmed.

Action by nurses and health care workers to defend themselves must be organized by rank-and-file workers themselves, independent of the MNA, which has a long record of betraying their struggles. In the 2010 contract struggle involving 12,000 nurses at all the major hospital systems, the MNA limited strike action to one day, opposing nurses' demands for an open-ended strike, and then rammed through a sellout agreement that ignored demands for improving nurse-to-patient ratios and other improvements.

In 2016, the MNA, in collaboration with the health care corporations, settled contracts with all the other hospitals except Allina. This left the Allina nurses isolated and fighting alone. Nevertheless, they carried out a determined struggle and voted down sellout contracts three times. Each time, the MNA brought back nearly identical concessions contracts for nurses until they pushed through a final settlement.

In the 2019 contract session, after being pressured by nurses to carry out a unified struggle, the MNA began to settle contracts separately and impose ratification votes before other nurses had contracts, once again sabotaging the demands of nurses.

In order to defend themselves, nurses should form rank-and-file safety committees at every hospital and clinic, encompassing nurses, doctors, medical technicians and other hospital workers. These committees will lead the struggle against hospital management and take the lead in decisive actions to combat the pandemic, including the provision of the necessary PPE, regular testing, increased staffing and reduced working hours. It must be up to these workers' committees to determine what is safe based on science, not on the demands of the for-profit health care system.

The pandemic has demonstrated to a broad and growing section of the working class that at the core of the current crisis is the capitalist system itself. The for-profit hospitals and other health care facilities, run by the corporate executives and bankers who sit on the boards of Allina and other hospitals, must be abolished and replaced by a system of socialized medicine. This means transforming the giant hospital chains, pharmaceutical and medical equipment manufacturers into public utilities controlled democratically by the working class.



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