

Why did a Massachusetts Nurses Association official appear at an event sponsored by the Morning Star in Britain?

Kate Randall

6 April 2021

Nurses at St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts are in their fifth week of their open-ended strike. The 700 nurses, members of the Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA), are fighting for safe staffing ratios at the hospital in the face of vicious attacks on their conditions by the owner of St. Vincent, multibillion-dollar Tenet Healthcare.

The nurses' strike is one of the largest workers struggles currently taking place in the US, alongside the strike of mine workers at Warrior Met Coal in Alabama and the Columbia University graduate students strike in New York City. However, the unions in these struggles—the MNA at St. Vincent, the United Mine Workers at Warrior Met Coal, the United Auto Workers at Columbia—have worked to isolate their memberships from workers facing the same fight in defense of jobs and working conditions, and against deplorable working conditions and corporate intimidation.

The recent appearance of an MNA official at a meeting sponsored by the *Morning Star*, aligned with the Communist Party of Britain, is a demonstration of this reality. It was not aimed at generating working class support for the St. Vincent nurses, but at smothering it with phony phrases of solidarity.

The Dallas, Texas-based conglomerate has so far spent at least \$22 million to hire strikebreaking replacement nurses. Worcester cops are being paid \$30,000 a day to keep both hospital entrances open to allow strikebreaking nurses to pass through. Hospital management has also installed two surveillance towers to monitor the entrances, in an effort at further intimidation.

The conditions nurses face at St. Vincent have been mirrored at health care facilities across the US during the pandemic. As the COVID-19 surge began more than a year ago, nurses and other health care workers found themselves without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) and taking care of untenable numbers of patients. Medical-surgical nurses faced exhaustion and burnout as they attempted to tend to patients flooding their surgical floors and intensive care units as COVID-19 spread.

The MNA has not provided its members with strike pay, despite controlling \$11.2 million in net assets and \$9.2 million in cash as of June of last year. Rather, nurses must demonstrate need to access the union's ad hoc relief fund. Adding insult to injury, the MNA has also advised nurses on seeking "alternative work" elsewhere to make ends meet. The United Food and Commercial

Workers (UFCW) pushed through a sellout agreement on their members, ancillary staff at St. Vincent, sending them back into the hospital in the midst of the nurses' struggle.

It is under these conditions that the co-chair of the MNA bargaining unit at St. Vincent, Dominique Muldoon, appeared last week at an event sponsored by the *Morning Star*, the newspaper originally founded as the *Daily Worker* by the Stalinist Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1930.

The paper's ownership was transferred to a "readers cooperative" in 1945 and was rebranded as the *Morning Star* in 1966. It describes its editorial stance as in line with the program of the Communist Party of Britain, whose blood-stained history is steeped in the support for the frame-up and murder of genuine revolutionaries, Trotskyists, and its alliance with the UK Labour Party, the trade unions and their betrayals of working-class struggles.

The *Morning Star* billed the 50-minute pre-recorded "Comrades broadcast" as aimed at "Uniting healthcare workers in international struggle." It was, however, nothing of the sort. Rather, it aimed to lull workers on both sides of the Atlantic into complacency. There was no talk of uniting the international working class in a political struggle against capitalism and its attendant misery.

Any worker listening to the broadcast was told that the unions would defend them, that they should put their faith in Democratic and Labour politicians, and that private health care operators in the US and the state-run National Health Service (NHS) in the UK could be convinced to treat their workers reasonably.

Muldoon was joined by Holly Turner, an NHS nurse and a GMB union rep in the UK. Over 7,000 full-time engineers and members of the GMB union have been in dispute with British Gas since early January and have taken 42 days of strike action against the fire and rehire contracts, in the largest industrial action in the sector for four decades.

British Gas has pressed ahead with plans to dismiss all engineers who refuse to sign an inferior contract, including a pay cut of up to 15 percent, only agreeing to put back the deadline from April 1 to April 14. The GMB is now taking steps to wind down the opposition entirely, postponing the date for a further national one-day walkout until April 14, the very day engineers will be

dismissed for refusing to sign or be transferred over to the new terms against their will.

Last Wednesday's event exposed the two union officials as the bureaucrats they are. Their comments had nothing to do with a socialist perspective, nor with fighting for an international strategy to unite workers against ruling-class policies in the pandemic, which has claimed the lives of 2.8 million globally and infected more than 131 million.

Turner purports to support the "NHS Workers Say NO" campaign, which has launched a petition drive demanding a 15 percent restorative pay increase for NHS workers. The campaign has gained the signatures of more than 600,000 outraged workers. It has been met, however, with a government announcement that it would offer only a 1 percent pay rise to more than 1 million NHS workers.

The response of the UNISON union, the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing has been to drop any call for united strike action and instead appeal to the government to change its mind. Turner is among those individuals close to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and its pseudo-left hangers-on who oppose the calls by the Socialist Equality Party in the UK and its NHS Fightback campaign for NHS workers to "organize industrial action independently of the unions" in solidarity with other sections of workers in this fight.

So, what should striking nurses actually make of this appearance by Muldoon at the event sponsored by the *Star*'s "Strike Map UK"? For purposes of a focus on the St. Vincent strike, we will highlight some of her choicest statements:

DM: We were just not prepared in the United States for the pandemic. Makeshift ICUs, buying raincoats off Amazon; garbage bags. The community was so great, supporting us. But it was not a well-planned-out response to the pandemic .

Just who was the "we" who were not prepared for the pandemic? It was the capitalist system and, particularly in the US, the for-profit health care system. Epidemiologists had predicted that such a pandemic would take place, but nothing was done to prepare because it cut across the ruling elite's profit motive.

DM: Tenet [owner of St. Vincent] makes profit out of sick people. In the states we don't think it's a bad thing to make money, but we don't think we should be taken advantage of. They have to put money back into the business and take care of people who are coming in for care.

But the US is a class society in which the ruling class exploits workers for a profit. Contrary to Muldoon's statement, millions of workers consider it a "bad thing" that a health care giant like Tenet should profit off the misery of health care workers and patients. And the appeals of union officials to corporations to not "take advantage" of workers is to blind them to the very nature of capitalism.

DM: Here [in the US] we don't go on strike as soon as the contract ends, we keep negotiating. ... It was a slow deliberate march toward a strike. We didn't want to have a job action in the middle of a surge. But negotiations started to break down.

Here Muldoon speaks some truth and explains how the unions really operate. They don't want to call out the workers and will do everything in their power to avert a strike. At St. Vincent, it was in

fact the rank-and-file nurses who could no longer accept the conditions of understaffing that placed their health and lives—and that of their patients—in danger. They forced the walkout against the efforts of the union to avoid it all costs.

Muldoon was finally asked what could be done to support the striking nurses in Massachusetts.

DM: All of the attention, the positive press we have gotten has been great. We do have a Venmo account for our strike fund, trying to get diapers and formula for our younger nurses with babies, things like that. As workers we all have to stick together. It doesn't matter where we are. Unions float the boat here.

Indeed. The MNA advises workers to support the strikers by contributing to a charitable account because they refuse to provide every striker with strike pay. The unions that supposedly "float the boat" in the US are in fact an anchor around the neck of every worker who wants to fight.

Muldoon also commented, "We had congressmen and senators coming to the picket line. The attorney general came." With social anger over the hundreds of thousands who have perished in the pandemic reaching a breaking point, the Biden administration, the Democratic Party and sections of the Republicans are aggressively promoting the unions. As is clear from this short analysis of the *Morning Star* event, Muldoon's performance demonstrates that the unions do not work to organize workers against management, but to organize management against the workers.

A genuine fight to unite health care workers in international struggle requires forging the struggle of nurses and other health care workers around the globe into a conscious and organized opposition. The pandemic has restructured class relations, with trillions looted from society globally by the super-wealthy.

Striking nurses should break free of the pro-corporate trade unions and form their own rank-and-file committees, taking control of the strike out of the hands of the unions and their big-business supporters. An organized contingent of health care workers can become a powerful force alongside rank-and-file committees formed by educators, autoworkers, Amazon workers and other workers internationally who are their allies in this fight. We urge striking nurses and who are interested in establishing such committees to contact us today .



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact