

Minnesota nurses picket Children's Hospital to protest job cuts, unsafe staffing

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Nurses picketed outside Children's Hospitals in Minneapolis and St. Paul June 8 to raise the alarm about insufficient staffing as the health care company redesigns its two campuses, and as elective surgeries increase workloads.

The Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA) revealed that the union has been meeting with management for several months to discuss the ramifications of downsizing its St. Paul hospital and the transfer of services to its Minneapolis campus. The MNA says that Children's is experiencing a shortage of beds and a staffing shortage.

Between May and August of 2020, during the second surge of the pandemic, Children's laid off 17 percent of its nursing workforce, a total of 180 nurses. Then in October 2020, as it considered reorganization plans, Children's laid off another 150 employees in various categories and canceled recruitment for 150 unfilled positions. At that time Children's declared the decision was designed to "permanently reduce staffing levels."

According to the *Minneapolis-St. Paul Business Journal*, Children's "patient volumes fell by as much as 80 percent during the pandemic's first peak earlier this year, and it lost \$8.1 million in the second quarter of this year on revenue of \$433.9 million." The hospital received CARES Act money totaling \$16.8 million, which did little to reverse its predicament.

On May 12, the MNA picketed Minnesota's third-largest health care system, Fairview Health Services, at its Southdale facility to protest hospital management's proposal to cut staffing. The result, according to the MNA, would be to increase the nurse-to-patient ratio from the previous ratio of one nurse to four or five patients, to one nurse for every six patients.

Minnesota's health care systems axed 42,000 jobs between March 2020 and April 2020 as the pandemic

gained momentum, and shut down its elective surgeries, resulting in losses in the billions of dollars. On May 4, 2021, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz issued an executive order that permitted the health care systems to restore elective surgeries. But corporate executives caution that health care systems will not automatically return services to pre-pandemic levels and profits.

"It's not a magic wand that's going to return things to normal overnight," Parker Eberwein, senior medical director for surgical services at HealthPartners told the *Business Journal*. Timothy Sielaff, former chief medical officer at Allina Health said the return to elective services "will help our finances." But ... "The financial challenges of our response to Covid-19 are really complex. There will remain challenges after this."

The irrationality of the capitalist profit system is exposed by the starving of funding for health care in the midst of the deadliest pandemic in a century. Only a socialist reorganization of health care under the control of the working class can put an end to the slashing of jobs, increased workloads and the danger this places on the safe delivery of health care to patients.

What stands in the way is the subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party and the profit system by the unions. While the MNA has given lip service to safe staffing ratios, the contract negotiations in 2010, 2016 and 2019 with the major health care systems have laid bare the union's role in sabotaging the struggles by nurses to establish safe workloads.

The drive by the corporations to reorganize health care at the expense of the working class is also revealed in the strike by 700 nurses at St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts, now into its 15th week. The Massachusetts Nurses Association and the labor

bureaucracy as a whole are isolating the strike and allowing management a free hand to bring in strikebreakers and starve out nurses on the picket line.

Nurses everywhere should follow the example of autoworkers, such as the Virginia Volvo workers and teachers in a number of states, to form rank-and-file committees in opposition to the alliance of the unions and corporate management. These committees must prepare the struggle to defend jobs, obtain safe staffing levels and take immediate action to provide aid to the embattled St. Vincent nurses and Volvo workers.



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