

Minnesota nurses union ends strike without settlement

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The 48 nurses who struck Allina's WestHealth facility in Plymouth, Minnesota returned to work October 20, concluding a three-day strike to demand holiday pay equivalent to nurses at the company's other facilities throughout the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area.

The issue of holiday pay for nurses has significance beyond the mere fact of remuneration. With understaffing amid the coronavirus pandemic, nurses are being forced to work long hours, including on holidays. Unlike other Allina nurses, they are not compensated with additional holiday pay.

The WestHealth strike ended without any movement by the company. There were no indications of scheduled talks and the Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA) said little more than that nurses were back to work.

There were two contrary tendencies on display in the WestHealth strike. On the one hand, the striking nurses want equality with the rest of Allina's nurses. One nurse characterized the attitude of the company towards them as "cheap labor." This comes on top of the dangerous conditions that nurses have labored under during the pandemic.

The dissatisfaction and anger that nurses across the profession feel was summed up in the recent ShiftMed annual survey of nursing, which found that 49 percent of nurses are at least "somewhat likely" to leave the nursing profession in the next two years. More than 90 percent said that the nursing shortage had made their jobs worse.

A more grisly statistic comes from a survey in the August issue of the American Journal of Nursing. In a survey of more than 7,000 nurses, 5.5 percent reported having suicidal ideation in the past year.

Given the deep anger among nurses who are

desperate for safe staffing ratios, better pay and a rational approach to working in the pandemic, the MNA called for a limited three-day strike in order to let off steam.

Allina did not resort to replacement nurses during the strike. Instead, it simply closed the WestHealth surgery center and moved its patients to other Allina facilities where union nurses essentially served as scabs.

MNA president Mary Turner declared nurses had been "disrespected, put down, devalued" by Allina's refusal to grant holiday pay. However, according to Allina, the MNA unanimously endorsed this same contract proposal. Nurses responded to the contract with an overwhelming strike vote.

While the MNA did nothing to mobilize masses of nurses behind the WestHealth strikers, it gushed over a number of Democrats who walked the picket line and made empty statements to pickets. The whole purpose was to divert strikers away from a broader struggle of all Twin Cities nurses and to convince them to await miracles to be performed by the Democratic Party.

This is of a piece with the MNA's history. In 2010, after the MNA retreated from the demand by some 12,000 nurses for an open-ended strike to force the issue of safe staffing ratios, the union leadership covered its betrayal by claiming it would pursue safe staffing ratios through the Minnesota legislature. Nothing came of this.

In 2016, the MNA signed contracts with all the other hospitals, leaving 4,000 Allina nurses to strike alone. Then Mary Turner authored an article entitled, "Solidarity is Alive and Well," citing as proof that over 100 Democrats issued meaningless statements supporting the strike. To isolate strikers from thousands of other nurses while speaking of "solidarity" with capitalist politicians demonstrates the nature of the

MNA bureaucracy as management contractor, opposed to the interests of workers.

Since the three-day strike, the focus of the MNA has been entirely on getting out the vote for the Democratic Party in the November 2nd elections. There is no talk of incorporating the WestHealth strikers into the broader organization of 10,000 to 15,000 nurses who have contracts expiring in 2022.

Nurses must not leave the direction of the coming struggle in the hands of the MNA. That will only result in another defeat. All nurses should begin immediately to organize rank-and-file committees, independent of the MNA to conduct the next fight and make it the focal point for mobilizing the entire working class of the Twin Cities. We encourage nurses to read the *World Socialist Web Site* and study the struggles of autoworkers, educators and food processing workers who have begun the organization of sections of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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