

Expand the Minnesota mental health workers strike! Unite with Minnesota nurses!

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Today's strike of 400 mental health workers from M Health Fairview University of Minnesota and Allina Health is part of the growing resistance of health care workers around the world against unsafe staffing levels, overwork and burnout and the subordination of public health to private profit.

Ten thousand New Zealand nurses held a one-day national strike for improved pay and working conditions on May 16. This follows recent strikes by Stanford nurses and Cedars-Sinai hospital service workers in California. In Minnesota, 15,000 nurses are heading into a battle when their contracts expire on May 31.

Health care workers, who have been in the forefront of the fight against the pandemic, have also borne the brunt of the criminal decision by the corporate and political establishment to prioritize profit over human life. The refusal by Trump and then Biden to take the necessary public health measures to eliminate the SARS-Cov-2 virus has led to more than 1 million deaths and the virtual breakdown of the medical system.

The giant health care monopolies—including Allina and Fairview—received billions in COVID relief money, ensuring the massive salaries of their corporate executives and business partners. Meanwhile, health care workers have lost their lives and been forced to work under intolerable conditions, leading to a mass exodus from the profession.

Psychologists, counselors, therapists, clinical social workers and psychiatrists face extreme conditions, including physical assaults. Nearly three-quarters of all workplace assaults occur in health care and social services sectors, with psychiatric care and substance abuse health care workers experiencing rates 12 times

higher than health care workers in general.

M Health Fairview and Allina mental health workers have repeatedly voiced their concerns about workplace safety. But M Health has refused to implement the most elemental COVID safety protocols, including weekly testing, PPE provided by M Health, and limiting visitors to combat the spread of the virus.

M Health Fairview has also neglected the needs of patients, converting an ambulance garage into a shelter for children who cannot be admitted due to overcapacity or eligibility.

These and other conditions led workers to unionize and to fight for their first contract. But the one-day strike called by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) will not solve these issues. What is needed is a far broader mobilization of health care workers and other workers to fight the health care corporations. This includes linking up with the 15,000 Minnesota nurses whose contract is set to expire on May 31 and preparing all-out strike action to demand adequate staffing, substantial wage increases to protect against surging inflation, and health and safety protections under the control of workers themselves.

To fight for this, M Health Fairview and Allina mental health workers have to build rank-and-file committees to outline their own demands, link up with other health care workers and broader sections of workers, including the striking CNH farm equipment workers in Iowa and Wisconsin.

M Health Fairview and Allina mental health care workers should learn from the fight to defend Tennessee nurse RaDonda Vaught, who Vanderbilt University Medical Center (VUMC) tried to railroad to jail for medical errors, which are the inevitable result of short staffing and other deficiencies. While the unions stood by and did nothing, hundreds of thousands of

nurses mobilized behind the slogan “I am RaDonda” to force the judge to give her parole rather than up to eight years in jail. The fight continues, but it was the initiative of rank-and-file nurses, not the unions, that was decisive.

The SEIU and other unions are opposed to the type of struggle needed to wrench concessions from the big corporations. For decades, they have preached “labor-management collaboration” and established countless committees on staffing, workplace safety, etc. that have produced nothing. In the end, the unions bow to the business needs of companies, which are wholly incompatible with the provision of quality health care and needs of health care workers.

Earlier this month, the SEIU ended a five-day strike by 2,000 nurses at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles against unsafe staffing levels, low pay, and for protections against the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Their history also extends into Minnesota health care, where they kept health care workers separate from 5,000 striking Allina health nurses in 2016, who battled both Allina Health and the Minnesota Nurses Association to protect their health care benefits and secure safe staffing ratios.

The unions are also tied to Biden and the Democratic Party, which defend for-profit medicine. The Biden administration has fully adopted a “let-it-rip” COVID policy, claiming that if you ignore the virus it will disappear. But the population and the health care system are once again being overrun, this time by the highly infectious and immune-resistant Omicron BA.2 and BA.2.12.1 subvariants. The two big-business parties in Washington, which are cutting funding for COVID and other life-saving measures, have nevertheless found billions for war.

Today’s strike is just the beginning of the fight. M Health Fairview and Allina mental health care workers should link up their fight with Minnesota nurses and others. A powerful counteroffensive by the working class is needed to break the domination of the giant hospital chains, insurance companies, pharmaceutical and medical device monopolies.

The WSWs *Health Care Workers Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party will give workers all the assistance they can to develop this fight. Contact us today.



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