Minneapolis mental health workers speak out during one-day strike: “Staffing issues have become worse”

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On Tuesday, more than 400 mental health workers in Minneapolis, Minnesota, carried out a one-day strike at M Health Fairview University of Minnesota and two Allina Health hospitals, Abbott Northwestern and Mercy Hospital-Unity Campus. The workers are fighting against problems which are endemic throughout the for-profit US health care system: gross understaffing, substandard pay and benefits and dangerous working conditions.

“One issue that we confront a lot on the job is threats to our safety,” Jordan, a mental health worker at Abbott Northwestern, told WSWS reporters on the picket line Tuesday. Jordan pointed to the heightened dangers facing mental health workers brought about by the social crisis facing the population, saying, “We experience violence in the workplace often from patients, and incidents of violence are increasing.”

“My unit was converted into a COVID unit,” she continued. “We actually merged our unit with COVID patients. We now see our patients and COVID patients. Because of this, staffing issues have become worse. Sometimes we are left to deal with 24 patients. We’re supposed to have two of us to 24 patients, but there are some situations where we are left without another mental health professional.

“COVID has definitely affected the health of my patients. For one, we’re seeing more patients with more severe cases.”

The walkout in Minneapolis is part of a growing wave of working class struggles across the US and internationally. In recent weeks, a movement has emerged among nurses and health care workers in particular, demanding better pay, better staffing ratios and humane working conditions.

Five thousand nurses at Stanford Health Care in California struck at the end of last month, 2,000 Cedars-Sinai hospital workers in Los Angeles carried out a five-day strike the week of May 9, and 350 nurses and hospital techs began a walkout Monday this week in Newark, New Jersey’s St. Michael’s Medical Center. Meanwhile, 10,000 nurses in New Zealand carried out a one-day strike on May 16.

While there is a growing determination to fight among health care workers and a widespread feeling that conditions have become intolerable, the unions have been working to block or contain strikes and impose contracts which leave the status quo in place.

In Minneapolis, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) confined the strike to just one day in advance, a frequent practice of the SEIU throughout the health care and service industries, which renders walkouts largely toothless. Rather than preparing a serious struggle to secure adequate staffing, workplace safety and a reversal in falling pay, the SEIU’s aim is to prevent a broader mobilization of mental health care professionals with nurses and health care workers across the country.

At the same time, SEIU sought to channel health care workers’ opposition behind fruitless appeals to the Democratic Party, which the union is deeply integrated into. At a noon rally on Tuesday, the SEIU invited Democratic Minnesota State Sen. Erin Murphy and Minnesota House Rep. Ryan Winkler, who is running for Hennepin County attorney, to grandstand before workers.

The Democratic Party has overseen and facilitated the impoverishment of health care workers across the nation, with the Obama administration slashing funding

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for Medicare by hundreds of billions of dollars while in office. In Minnesota, multiple legislative initiatives have been deliberately started and scrapped in an attempt to sow illusions in a legislative solution to the capitalist crisis in health care, including the “Keeping Nurses at the Bedside Act,” introduced by Erin Murphy.

In 2016, when 5,000 Allina nurses rejected multiple sellout contracts attacking staffing ratios and their employer-sponsored health care, it was the Democratic administration of Governor Mark Dayton and Lieutenant Governor Tina Smith who played the role of “sledgehammer” in ending the strike and forcing the unfavorable conditions onto nurses.

While the unions have worked with the giant hospital chains and the Democratic Party to impose concessionary agreements and unsafe working conditions, nurses and health care workers have begun to organize independently to assert their interests.

Last Sunday, nurses from around the US voted to establish a national steering committee, which resolved to build rank-and-file committees of health care workers throughout hospitals and other workplaces. The steering committee also resolved to fight back against the growing efforts to victimize health care workers, such as Tennessee nurse RaDonda Vaught, who was scapegoated for a fatal medication error, and only kept from serving prison time by a mass mobilization of nurses in advance of her sentencing.

Jordan made clear that the issues facing mental health workers are widespread, affecting nurses, doctors and other health care workers. “We should have a greater say in policy decisions that directly affect our safety. I think that we have the best idea of how to solve safety issues we encounter.”

Referring to the upcoming contract expiration for 15,000 nurses in the Twin Cities, Jordan said a common fight would strengthen their position. “Nurses also help us with these staffing shortages, but they also have a lot of pressure on them… we would be able to have more of a voice if we joined them.”

Other mental health workers picketing Tuesday pointed to the corrosive impact of profit on health care, with signs such as “Honk if you hate corporate health care” and “people before profits.”

When reporters contrasted the massive military budget and billions received by hospital chains in COVID-19 relief funds, Mamie, a mental health coordinator at Abbott Northwestern, agreed that workers need to control their working conditions and pay. “Socialist medicine is definitely needed in America,” she said.

“A lot of patients are state service people, and they, like myself, need mental health care,” said another mental health professional who wished to remain anonymous. “I am on a health care plan that Allina calls ‘expanded,’ yet the clinic they sent me to was not covered under this plan.”

“The hospital’s insurance for us health care workers doesn’t cover mental health treatments beyond a certain point. I had to pay out of pocket for my mental health care.”

In response to a WSWS reporter explaining the need to link up the struggles of health care workers to combat the giant hospital chains and to form new organizations to lead the fight, the worker agreed, saying, “400 of us is really not enough to combat Allina. I’m all for new organizations.”

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