Minnesota Allina mental health workers begin 3-day strike: Build rank-and-file committees to unite with nurses!

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Work in health care in Minnesota or Wisconsin? We want to hear from you: Fill out the form at the end of the article to tell us about the conditions at your workplace, and what you think health care workers should be fighting for.

Today, around 260 Allina Health mental health workers in Minneapolis and Fridley, Minnesota, are beginning a three-day strike. The strike, originally announced by the Service Employees International Union Healthcare Minnesota and Iowa union as a joint walkout with 130 M Health Fairview workers, is part of a growing surge in working class resistance to unsafe staffing levels, overwork and burnout, and the rising cost of living amidst record inflation and continuing pandemic.

Late last week, in a significant act of treachery, the SEIU called off the strike of M Health Fairview workers, isolating the remaining Allina workers, and undermining the fight by both sections of workers.

Health care workers have faced decades of declining pay, benefits and working conditions along with other sections of workers in addition to carrying the weight of the consequences of the murderous "let-it-rip" policy related to COVID-19, which has generated a rush of patients admitted to hospitals and clinics across the country.

In the face of new demands for austerity and budget cuts amid worsening conditions, the opposition among health care workers has intensified. After the conclusion of a three-day strike last month, 15,000 nurses in Minnesota are still working without contracts after the Minnesota Nurses Association union (MNA) deliberately limited in advance in order to prevent a broader confrontation with the for-profit health care system and Democratic Party.

Since the beginning of 2022, there have been over 15 major strikes by health care and hospital workers. Some of these include:

• 15,000 MNA nurses at 15 different hospitals in the Twin Cities recently went on strike over the same issues as mental health care workers. They have been working for over three months with no contract.

• Kaleida Health hospital workers in New York overwhelmingly voted to strike only days after the strike by Minnesota nurses.

• 2,000 Kaiser Permanente mental health care workers in California have been on strike for better staffing ratios, wages and conditions for patients since August.

• 6,200 Michigan Medicine nurses have already voted overwhelmingly to strike

Rather than unite with this growing surge, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) at Allina Health has done the opposite.

In calling off the strike at M Health Fairview without a contract, citing supposed progress that they have made in negotiations, the SEIU has engaged in an open betrayal of both M Health Fairview workers and Allina Health workers. Workers should reject this and remain on strike until all hospitals have settled.

In order to oppose this stab in the back and expand their strike, Allina and M Health Fairview mental health workers must build new, rank-and-file committees to advance their own demands, and link their fight with health care workers across the US and internationally.

In May, the same Allina and M Health Fairview mental health care workers carried out a one-day strike

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at M Health Fairview University of Minnesota and two Allina Health hospitals, Abbott Northwestern and Mercy Hospital-Unity Campus. The strike was in response to problems widespread throughout the US health care system: serious understaffing, dangerous working conditions, and inadequate pay and benefits.

As part of their demands, M Health Fairview and Allina mental health workers repeatedly voiced concerns over workplace safety, but M Health Fairview refused to implement basic COVID-19 safety protocols, such as weekly testing, PPE provided by the hospital and limits on the number of visitors.

Giant health care systems, including Allina and Fairview, received billions in COVID-19 relief money, safeguarding the inflated salaries of their corporate executives and business partners. At the same time health care workers in the hospitals have faced extreme conditions without any end in sight. This is evoking massive opposition, causing many to leave the profession.

The strategy being pursued by the SEIU is similar to what the MNA has done with nurses, attempting to reach settlements to isolate sections of nurses from one another, limiting the impact of strikes and allowing management to bring in strikebreakers. This happened in 2016 with MNA nurses, when the MNA settled contracts and brought nurses back to work at every hospital except Allina hospitals, leaving 6,000 nurses to fight alone.

The policies of the SEIU to isolate and betray struggles of health care workers is tied to the union's alliance to Biden and the Democratic Party, which defend for-profit health care and have fully adopted Trump's "let-it-rip" COVID-19 policy. Health care workers are again witnessing hospital systems being overwhelmed as the highly infectious and immune-resistant Omicron BA.2 and BA.2.12.1 subvariants rip through the population. While Biden claims that the pandemic is over, Washington, which is abandoning measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and other life-saving measures, have poured countless billions into the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

Allina and M Health Fairview workers are in a powerful position. United with 15,000 nurses around the Twin Cities as well as nurses and health care workers across the country, they can win their demands. This must be part of a broader counteroffensive by the working class to break the domination of the hospital giants, insurance companies, pharmaceutical and medical device monopolies.

However, this strategy can only be successful through a break from the Democratic Party-controlled unions and the building of independent rank-and-file committees. We call on Allina Health workers to follow the lead of health care workers around the US by building a rank-and file committee at your workplaces. For more information or to report on your conditions, contact the Health Care Workers Rank-and-File Committee, or fill out the form below.

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