

Minnesota nurses union calls open-ended strike for Labor Day

Matt Rigel
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The Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA) has announced it will call an open-ended strike by 4,800 nurses on Labor Day, September 5, against Allina Health hospitals in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. The strike was called after rank-and-file nurses rejected the latest three-year contract proposal from the hospital chain, which includes demands for deep cuts to health benefits and the refusal to discuss safe staffing ratios.

Nurses, who overwhelmingly voted to authorize the walkout, are determined to fight back against increases in out-of-pocket costs that would make medical coverage far less affordable to the healthcare providers themselves. In addition, like nurses throughout the United States, and for that matter internationally, Allina nurses face dangerously high patient-to-nurse ratios and relentless demands that they take on extra duties.

The MNA has suggested, however, that it would call off the planned strike if a federal mediator orders the parties back to the table and progress was supposedly made. A statement on the union's web site declared, "It is likely our MNA negotiators will be called back to the table by the federal mediator prior to the start of strike. Should this occur, your negotiating team will be working to get a settlement and will keep you updated."

The MNA has presented the intervention of a federal mediator—who the MNA claims is "trying to help us get a deal"—as if it would bolster the nurses' chances of winning a good contract from Allina. Any such intervention by Obama's Labor Department and a federal mediator, however, would entirely be at the expense of nurses. The Obama administration has repeatedly intervened—from the 2015 lockout of 20,000 West Coast dockworkers to the shutdown of the nearly two-month strike by 50,000 Verizon telecom workers earlier this year—to prevent any unified struggle by the working class against the government-backed attack on

wages and health and pension benefits.

Far from defending the working class, Obama and the Democrats have overseen the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top. Obama's Affordable Care Act (ACA), better known as Obamacare, has been a boon to the pharmaceutical giants, insurance monopolies and hospital chains while healthcare has become increasingly unaffordable for working people. ACA also includes the so-called Cadillac Tax on supposedly overgenerous healthcare plans, which employers have used to force workers into inferior, higher-costing plans.

Finally, the increased workloads nurses are fighting are the direct product of the cost-cutting drive initiated by the ACA. Obamacare has produced an influx of recently insured patients on low-quality health plans, but hospitals have not responded by any corresponding increase in staffing levels. While maximizing the profits of the industry, this has increased workloads and endangered patients.

The unions are particularly opposed to any strike that could undermine their effort to elect Hillary Clinton, a warmonger and the favored candidate of Wall Street. The "Solidarity Rally" Wednesday afternoon highlighted the unions' efforts to subordinate the jobs and livelihoods of nurses to their alliance with the Democratic Party. Far from mobilizing nurses and workers throughout the Twin Cities for a real struggle against Allina, the event was used to parade a pack of false friends in front of the nurses. This included union bureaucrats from the AFL-CIO and affiliated unions who all have a record of betraying workers' struggles, along with Democratic US Congressman Keith Ellison.

Ellison bemoaned the increasing price of drugs like the EpiPen as part of the attack on nurses' workloads and healthcare. He failed to mention, however, that

Obama and his own party have done everything to protect the interests of the for-profit healthcare industry.

Thus the “solidarity” between the union bureaucrats and the Democratic Party is in fact a conspiracy against the Allina nurses and the working class as a whole. Over the next several days, the union bureaucrats and the federal mediator will do everything to block a strike by nurses, and if that is not possible, to strangle it as soon as possible.

After the one-week strike in June, the MNA began the process of compromise with management by offering to abandon two of its traditional healthcare plans in order to accede to management’s cost-cutting demands in July. The MNA further surrendered to management by taking safe staffing ratios off the table. Nurses have repeatedly stated on social media and in conversations with reporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* that staffing ratios are a key issue in their battle.

Allina Health executives have taken full advantage of this and remained entirely intransigent, insisting that nurses must give up their quality health plans before an agreement can be reached.

Nurses have remained opposed to this for the duration of the struggle. Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Emily, an Allina nurse at the rally, agreed that the outcome of the nurses struggle would have a direct impact on the coverage for all healthcare workers. "It's not just nurses, but all healthcare workers. This is a testing site, and what happens here will set a precedent for nurses and healthcare workers around the state and the country."

When WSWS reporters explained the need for Allina nurses to appeal to the entire working class to win their demands, she replied, “That would be amazing.”

Among nurses who turned out in support of Allina nurses was Aaron who works at Hennepin County Medical Center (HCMC). He agreed with the necessity to mobilize Twin Cities health workers behind the Allina nurses’ fight. "If the Allina nurses were to lose their healthcare plans, HCMC and hospitals all over the country would follow."

The months-long struggle by nurses has demonstrated that the biggest obstacle to a fight against Allina and the powerful financial and political interests behind it is the MNA and National Nurses United that are allied with the Obama administration and the Democrats.

Rank-and-file nurses must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by electing committees to mobilize the broadest sections of the working class behind their fight.

This must be the beginning of a political counter-offensive against both big business parties and to put an end to for-profit healthcare and replace it with socialized medicine.



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