

Critical turning point as nurses vote on concessions

Mobilize Minnesota workers behind Allina nurses

By Matt Rigel
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The 4,800 nurses at Allina Health in the metro-region of Minneapolis and St. Paul will vote August 18 on Allina's recent contract proposal that guts nurses' health care plans. The Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA) has called on nurses to reject the proposal with the additional proviso that a two-thirds rejection will allow the negotiating committee to launch an open-ended strike.

Allina CEO Penny Wheeler calls the company's most recent proposal a "significant compromise." Nothing could be further from the truth. The essence of management's position is to allow nurses to keep two of the union-backed health care plans in name only, while the future expense of maintaining these plans will be shifted onto the backs of nurses.

The nurses' contract struggle, which began back in February, has been characterized by a determined drive by Allina management to force nurses off their current healthcare plans and onto corporate plans with the result that the company will save \$10 million a year.

Allina faced a seven-day strike in June at a cost of \$20.4 million for replacement workers and other expenses. They hope that a defeat of the nurses will clear the way for even greater concessions in the future in terms of wages, pensions and working conditions.

When Brigham and Women's Hospital in Massachusetts spent \$24 million to take on their nurses earlier this year, the chief financial officer for the parent company blandly remarked, "frankly, at the end of the day, it was the cost of doing business." It is no different for Allina.

While the MNA has called on nurses to vote "no," nurses should consider carefully the situation they now find themselves in. It was the MNA that started down

the road of "compromise" on the healthcare plans when it was clear that Allina would accept nothing short of their destruction.

In its "compromise" proposal, the MNA hoped to obtain a cover from Allina for its capitulation on the issue of healthcare and in other areas. On wages, it is supporting the company's two-percent annual wage hikes, which will be more than offset by increased healthcare costs. Among the MNA requests was a \$1,000 signing bonus. Traditionally, the labor bureaucracy and corporations have used signing bonuses as a means of bribing workers to accept regressive contracts. The cost to management of paying out the bonus will be more than covered through savings on healthcare and other concessions.

Management has pursued a strategy aimed at dividing Allina nurses from their co-workers at other hospitals. At the beginning of this year the MNA concluded wages-only contracts with 6,000 nurses at the other five healthcare systems in the Twin Cities, claiming this protected benefits for these nurses. That decision, however, left the 4,800 Allina nurses to fight on their own. Whatever concessions are now imposed by the MNA on Allina nurses will form the basis for future concession demands by other healthcare operators.

Nurses should recall the outcry by the corporate and media establishment in 2010 when 12,000 nurses were poised for an open-ended strike that the hospitals were ill-prepared to withstand. Today, there is no outcry from the corporate establishment to the MNA's call for an open-ended strike. This is for the simple reason that it is confident that the MNA's call for an open-ended strike is toothless now that Allina nurses have been separated from nurses at other area hospitals. They

believe that nurses can be worn down and ultimately forced to accept concessions that will not only be used as a battering ram against other nurses, but against all hospital workers.

Allina's obstinate position over healthcare plans did not develop overnight. Back in 2009 President Barack Obama revealed to *Business Week* that in discussions with corporate CEO's he advised they copy the policy of slashing the wages and benefits of industrial workers during the 1980's and transfer this to other sectors of the working class. "What they pointed out was, there were a couple of sectors that were resistant to that: health care, education, energy, and government," said Obama. "Can we introduce the same sort of productivity in the health-care industry, which we know is going to be a growing sector?"

What is clear is that the struggle by Allina nurses to defend their healthcare plans is part of an overall struggle to defend healthcare for the entire working class. Therefore, it requires the unity and mobilization of the widest possible movement of workers.

But the MNA is opposed to this. Instead, it seeks to subordinate the working class to the corporations and banks through its insistence that workers must support the Democratic Party. This was the essence of MNA President Mary Turner's article on the MNA website, entitled, "Solidarity is Alive and Well," which listed the names of more than 100 politicians as supporters of the MNA.

In the presidential elections, the MNA initially endorsed Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders as the Democratic candidate, whose rhetoric about a "billionaire class" and a "political revolution" resonated more widely among nurses as opposed to the more openly pro corporate candidate Hilary Clinton. But with Sanders' endorsement of Clinton, his campaign has been exposed as merely a way of keeping disgruntled workers within the capitalist two-party system.

The bluntest warning must be made to nurses. Victory in their struggle will not be in any way facilitated by support from the Democratic Party. It will only come through a struggle against the Democratic Party establishment including such figures as Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton as well as the mayors of Minneapolis and St. Paul and the Democratic state legislators and city council.

If nurses are to enter into an open ended strike, it will require the broadest mobilization of workers. Immediately, a substantial rank-and-file committee composed of at least 100 of the most militant nurses must be elected to direct the strike. It must send delegations of nurses to rally support from all sections of the working class—hospital workers, construction workers, transit workers, government employees and industrial workers.

In turn, workers who respond to the appeal of Allina nurses must set up their own support committees that will mobilize workers from their workplaces and neighborhoods for the coming struggle. These committees must ensure that Allina nurses are not starved into submission by management during an open-ended strike.

Mass rallies must be held in cities across the state and draw in national support so that the mobilization in defense of Allina will serve as a beacon to all workers who face deteriorating living standards and are looking for a way to open a wedge against the corporations.

Above all workers require a new political strategy. They must break with the two parties of Wall Street, the Democrats and Republicans, and forge an independent political movement of the working class. This party must be based on a program that starts with the needs of workers and their families, not the profit requirements of the rich—in other words, a socialist perspective. This includes a struggle by the working class to take the healthcare system out of the hands of the corporations and place it under the democratic control of the working class, that is, genuine socialist healthcare.

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