

“We are representing the entire working class”

## Minnesota nurses reject sellout contract, continue strike

By Matt Rigel and Jerry White  
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Displaying tremendous militancy and determination, 4,800 nurses in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area in Minnesota voted down Allina Health’s contract proposal for the fourth time. The nurses, who have been engaged in a one-month strike at five area hospitals, overwhelmingly defeated the deal brought back by the Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA), which would have sharply increased out-of-pocket health care costs and allowed the hospital chain to continue increasing workloads.

The results of this vote are an expression of the growing defiance of not only the nurses but the entire working class, which has been forced to bear stagnating wages and higher health and pension costs even as the corporate executives and financiers rake in millions.

The nurses stood up to all of the political forces arrayed against them—the hospital bosses who have spent \$40 million to hire strikebreakers and then cut nurses off of their health care on October 1; the corporate-controlled media, which has unsuccessfully campaigned for a back-to-work movement; phony “friends” from the Democratic Party, from Bernie Sanders to US Congressman Keith Ellison, who support Obama’s reactionary Affordable Care Act that has been used by employers across the country to destroy their employees’ medical coverage.

Above all, the vote by rank-and-file nurses was a stunning rebuke to the MNA and its parent union, National Nurses United (NNU), which are allied with the Democrats and function as little more than tools of the for-profit interests that dominate the health care industry. Having deliberately isolated striking nurses for a month, the MNA/NNU expected them to be cowed into accepting the company’s demands due to

the combined economic pressure of losing a month’s pay, receiving nothing but starvation level strike benefits from the union, and seeing their medical insurance cancelled by Allina.

“We are representing the entire working class,” one striking nurse at Abbott Northwestern hospital in Minneapolis told the *World Socialist Web Site* the day of the vote. Another said, “Our voice needs to be heard because the media doesn’t give us a voice.”

Commenting on already heavy workloads, another Abbott nurse said, “They will put four surgical patients on you in addition to what you have already been working. We do so much we even break our backs. I know nurses with back issues from working, and they still work.”

As for the union-management committees regarding staffing or health benefits, another nurse added, “These labor committees and such, they produce nothing for us. In the end, they still represent the hospital more, even when a union representative sits on them.”

The union called the vote after feigning surprise over Allina’s intransigence during federal mediated negotiations. “[D]ue to the unwillingness of Allina to make any further movement without additional concessions elsewhere, our Negotiating Team made the hard decision to take this contract offer to you for a vote,” read the bargaining update announcing the vote.

Why should Allina budge when the MNA has done everything to sabotage any real struggle by nurses? Since the strike began, the unions have systematically isolated the struggle—ordering another 6,000 MNA members at five other area hospitals to continue working—while engaging in impotent publicity stunts designed to demoralize strikers, including appeals to

corporate executives on Allina’s board of directors and various Democratic Party politicians. None of this has done any damage to Allina or the corporate and political forces behind it.

The defeat of the contract is a powerful step forward. But it would be fatal to believe a rejection alone will convince the employers or the MNA to end their conspiracy to ram through this or a somewhat altered sellout agreement. The rejection must be followed by the election of rank-and-file strike committees to spread the struggle to all area hospitals and to fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class throughout the Twin Cities, the state and nationally, and to appeal to health care workers internationally for solidarity.

In the tradition of the 1934 Minneapolis General Strike—led by Trotskyists and other socialist-minded workers—delegations of nurses should be dispatched to area workplaces, universities and schools to hold mass demonstrations, rallies and other common actions.

Above all, nurses must realize they are facing a *political* fight. The attainment of the most elemental social rights—a secure and good-paying job, high-quality health care, decent work conditions, a pension, etc.—pits workers in a struggle against the entire economic and political order of capitalism, which subordinates social needs—including the right to health care—to the ever-greater accumulation of wealth by the corporate and financial oligarchy. The ruling elite controls the big business parties and both of its candidates—Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.

The refusal of the MNA and the NNU to conduct a serious fight is not simply due to the cowardice of individual leaders. The unions are opposed to a broader mobilization of the working class to fight Allina and the corporate and political forces that are behind it because this would interfere with their campaign to elect Clinton.

Well aware of the deep hostility to Clinton, the MNA—which includes on its bargaining committee members of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative organization—continues to promote Bernie Sanders in order to promote the illusion that the Democrats can be pushed to the left. Sanders, however, has proven to be just as much of a fraud as the MNA and NNU officials, and traveled to Minneapolis Tuesday to promote Clinton, a warmonger and tool of Wall Street.

Even before calling the open-ended strike on September 5—which was forced on union officials by rank-and-file nurses—the MNA had already capitulated to Allina’s main demand to replace union health care plans with corporate-run plans. The MNA has only sought some kind of face-saving concession from Allina—a signing bonus, union-management oversight over workloads, bogus promises not to increase out-of-pocket costs, etc.—in order to sell it to the defiant membership.

In a statement posted on the MNA’s Facebook page, one of the union’s negotiators, Angela Becchetti, acknowledged this, saying, “Nurses said they would end their affordable healthcare plans in the year 2020, but they haven’t been adequately compensated for it.”

This statement only demonstrates the immense chasm between nurses and the MNA apparatus. While the MNA has accepted the cancellation of the current plans and other givebacks, the resounding “no” vote by the nurses makes it clear they do not.

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