

Main Street or Wall Street: Which Side Are You On?

by Sandy Eaton, RN, NNU Delegate

This stark question was posed to sixty federal legislators in twenty states on September 1st by thousands of nurses and their allies. The main demand was for pledges of support for a small tax on stock transactions which would generate up to \$350 billion per year in order to fund such vital services as jobs, housing, education, health care and the rebuilding of rusting infrastructure. From Maine to California, from Minnesota to Florida, bystanders and media alike were startled and forced to rethink their former image of nurses. The Boston Herald [editorialized](#) that nurses - read "women" - and their unions should keep their noses out of national issues and high finance. Such backward thinking was sternly rebuffed by letters to the editor.

The events of September 1st brought the unfolding Main Street Contract [campaign](#) of the National Nurses United to a new plateau. In late February, nurses from Wisconsin and surrounding states raised the [No Concessions](#) demand in Madison, even though some public-sector unions had earlier agreed to cuts equalling 8% so as to avoid right-wing charges of being self-serving, and to focus on union rights and survival instead of economics. The No Concessions demand caught fire among the rank-and-file, and a new level of militancy took off.

In June, NNU targeted the [US Chamber of Commerce](#), across Lafayette Park from the White House, and [Wall Street](#) itself, demanding "Take It Back - Tax Wall Street." These national actions were followed up by three-score, transcontinental actions on September 1st. Later a thousand nurses and allies demonstrated in San Francisco on September 15th at the [Federal Reserve Bank](#). The US Treasury Building in Washington, DC will be the target of such action on November 3rd.

Nurses in so-called "Right to Work" states, who recently formed unions at over fifteen hospitals owned by the giant hospital chains of Hospital Corporation of America and Tenet Corporation, conducted "Main Street actions" all over Florida and Texas. National Nurses United conducted political education of its members in the South, explaining the necessity of adding the Main Street Campaign to its militant campaign for a first union contract in many hospitals, and linking the demands of the Main Street campaign to those of a union contract.

In Boston, over 150 people gathered for a noon-time [rally](#) outside the office of Republican Senator Scott Brown. The Massachusetts Nurses Association, the Massachusetts Senior Action Council, DSA, PDA, the Greater Boston Labor Council and the Labor Guild of the Archdiocese of Boston mobilized. Featured was a revolutionary-era town crier, complete with tri-corner hat, ringing the bell to summon all to hear the news that we are challenging the senator to take the side of Main Street instead of Wall Street.

At NNU's San Francisco convention on September 16th, delegates rose to speak to the local actions they had organized on September 1st. Here are a few highlights:

- ♣ San Diego: Three hundred workers rallied at the office of Representative Darrell Issa (R), who asked, "Why are the nurses attacking risk takers and job creators?"
- ♣ Orange County: Nurses approached the offices of both DP and RP representatives, but received

no support and were kicked out.

- ✧ San Bernardino County: Participants in the labor breakfast signed pledge cards, fed the homeless, and then all participated in a rally denouncing the hypocritical calls for shared sacrifice. Such was the turnout that they ran out of food. Representative Joe Baca (D) signed the pledge.
- ✧ San Francisco: A Kaiser nurse reported feeding the hungry at the federal building, where they tried to speak with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, but she wasn't there.
- ✧ LA: Representative David Dreier (R) was not there when the nurses and teachers showed up.
- ✧ Sacramento: Representative Tom McClintock (R) had sheriffs there to greet the nurses.
- ✧ Chicago: Faced by food stamp slashes and other drastic cutbacks, demonstrators sang the blues at a senatorial office, only to be escorted out by Homeland Security.
- ✧ Michigan: Several events around the state included a soup kitchen and a tail gate party, garnering lots of pledges of support for the campaign.
- ✧ Richmond: Fifty nurses from the Washington Hospital Center in DC went by bus to the office of Representative Eric Cantor (R) for a spirited two-hour picket. They were joined by NNU co-president Karen Higgins, DC Labor Council President Jos Williams and Mark Dudzic, director of the Labor Campaign for Single Payer. There were no arrests, although civil disobedience was under consideration.
- ✧ Brownsville: Nurses set up a blood pressure clinic and did health teaching at a senior day care center. They discussed potential cuts to services and gathered support for the campaign. They then approached Representative Blake Farenthold's (R) office with pledge cards. He pointed out that he had taken the no taxes pledge, but he promised to go home, pray and talk to his RN wife, but there had been no call back from him yet.
- ✧ Minneapolis: While Representative Michele Bachmann (R) was speaking at the American Legion convention, assuring no cuts to military spending, representatives of the labor and religious communities held a mock press conference outside her field office featuring a ten-foot puppet of her.
- ✧ Dayton: VA nurses set up a soup kitchen and rallied outside the office of Representative Mike Turner (R). A displaced GM worker, who spoke at the rally, was offered a job when seen on the local news.
- ✧ Orlando: Nurses were denied entrance to the office of Senator Marco Rubio (R), but a staffer finally met with them, asserting that his boss supports Social Security, but he would not sign the pledge.

Some have asked why the NNU has not included ending the wars and occupations in the Main Street Contract agenda, to free human and material resources to rebuild our country. NNU was founded in December 2009, made up of a number of building blocks. Of these, California and Minnesota had taken clear anti-war stands in the weeks leading up to the illegal, preemptive invasion of Iraq in 2003. NNU's other components had not. The California Nurses Association has aided and supported US Labor Against the War over the years. So NNU as such lacks a formal position on the issue. Nevertheless, peace is a majority position in the United States right now. Concerns had been expressed by some NNU leaders that they shouldn't let the Main Street Contract campaign be marginalized by being identified with the Left. Yet riveting attention on the sharp disparity of interest between the symbol of US capitalism, Wall Street, and those plundered by Wall Street, those living on Main Street, has won NNU the respect and admiration of much of the US Left. Perhaps this

contradiction will be sorted out in the months ahead.

As of this writing, thousands are occupying Wall Street and preparing to conduct similar outcries against injustices in cities across the country. Perhaps this [Main Street Contract](#) which identifies Wall Street as the principle culprit has inspired such actions and provided a stimulus for truly massive action and subsequent organization to turn the country around.

This report was enriched by input from Carl Bloice and nurses across the country.