Four very different events this spring, thousands of miles apart, symbolize the rapid emergence and growth of our national nurses’ movement—and how it is already shaking the economic and political elite that hold so much sway in our nation.

First came the convening of a thousand nurses in Washington in mid-May for our incredible Staff Nurse Assembly, a coming-out party for National Nurses United and a signal to the Beltway establishment that times have changed.

One lasting image perhaps best symbolized the emergence of this new, national voice for direct-care RNs: hundreds of nurses in red NNU scrubs flowing through the Capitol corridors, and streaming into Congressional offices to press for passage of our NNU-sponsored legislation.

Nurse after nurse later remarked on the surprised looks on the faces of lobbyists, Congressional staff, and visitors at seeing working nurses, in their working attire, filling the hallsways in Congress, and the river of people who approached them with personal thanks for their daily work protecting patients and saving lives.

Just days later, the earth moved in South and West Texas, in a state that for many represents a decades-long struggle of unions to give workers a real voice in their workplace to improve conditions for themselves, their families, and their communities.

In an unbelievable two weeks, nearly 2,000 RNs in hospitals operated by the country’s biggest hospital chain voted to join our NNU affiliate, NNOC-Texas, shaking the economic and political landscape of Texas and the South.

The elections sent an unmistakable message about the opportunity to finally win a union voice for tens of thousands of unrepresented RNs who will become powerful national advocates for patient care and nursing standards in the broader movement for social change.

Far to the north a few days later, in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, more than 12,000 Minnesota RNs struck 14 hospitals in a historic stand for safer staffing to protect patients and the ability of RNs to retire in dignity after a lifetime of caring for others.

The walkout, the biggest ever by nurses, demonstrated emphatically that unified RNs have the power to resist the economic might of a multi-billion-dollar hospital industry determined to reduce RN and patient care standards. “It’s time to say that we’re going to do what we have to do to protect our patients,” said NNU Co-president Karen Higgins, RN on one of the picket lines.

And, finally, we have the spectacle of one of the world’s richest women, corporate CEO Meg Whitman, declaring war on California nurses and their union, apparently concluding that we are the biggest obstacle to her campaign to buy the governor’s office in California.

Whitman targeted nurses and CNA after our “Queen Meg” parody campaign across the state mocked her assumption that her vast personal wealth of $1.3 billion and record spending in the Republican primary entitled her to be anointed governor and carry out her corporate agenda of eroding public and workplace protections, slashing safety net programs, and muffling the voice of working people and their unions.

With the arrogance familiar to any nurse who has met their hospital CEO or nursing director, Whitman demanded that we hand over to her the home addresses of all of our members with the threat of additional actions if we did not agree to surrender this personal information.

We, of course, refused, but did offer Whitman the opportunity to speak directly to nurses in unscripted forums with her main opponent, state Attorney Gen. Jerry Brown (who accepted the invitation). When Whitman declined, we even offered her the chance to appear in such town hall events alone, moderated by the news media.

But it was apparent that Whitman was not looking for genuine interaction with nurses.

First came the intrusive phone calls, through a bogus survey—in political jargon a “push poll”—not intended to elicit information but to propagandize with distorted messages to disparage and undermine our organization.

Then came the mailings. Then the anti-CNA website. If the tactics look familiar, it’s because they are common grist for the army of hospital industry attorneys and anti-union consultants who have used the same themes in their efforts to roll back patient care and workplace protections, and economic standards and retirement security RNs have won through collective representation.

CNA and NNU know what is at stake. It’s why we made the decision to challenge Whitman, and her plans to freeze or reduce regulations, the public oversight that is the first target of the business interests Whitman personifies.

It’s why she has proposed taking away guaranteed meal and rest breaks, overtime pay, and what she disgracefully calls “the gold-plated retirement benefits” earned by public-sector nurses, often in lieu of equitable pay. And those are just the first items on the chopping block in a potential Whitman administration.

Whitman sees nurses as a threat because they are the guardians of patient safety, the truth-tellers to power, the ones who have earned top marks in every poll of the most trusted and ethical professions. And they are not fooled by Whitman’s promise to marginally increase nursing programs by cutting money for public safety net programs in the midst of this economic crisis or her flip-flopping on ratios that sounds a whole lot like the empty promises made by hospital executives.

It’s for these reasons and more that Whitman views nurses and our national organization as a major impediment. And it’s why we will continue to challenge Whitman and other corporate politicians and hospital CEOs who put patients, nurses, and the public at risk.

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