

Will Revolutionary Nurses Signal the Dawn of a New Day?

by Signe Gleeson

Several years ago, I read one nurse's view of organized nursing's system that was focused on profitability. She said it was a system that "submerged women beneath so much work that they could not possibly have the opportunity to surface and recognize their exploitation, let alone act against it."

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In this world, she said, where regimented expectations dictated that nurses follow their leaders, "Free thinking and radicalized nurses are removed from circulation or, at the very least, are disowned by the promoters of nursing."

When I read these words, I thought them rather harsh. But the events of the past few months seem to validate them and offer a vivid example of nurse cannibalism at its worst. Today, when nurses need encouragement to fight the forces that are compromising patient care and maximizing shareholder profits, it is ironic that organized nursing has dismissed or silenced the type of agitation needed in the workplace.

The CNA's nurses voted to secede from the ANA only after the ANA waged an aggressive campaign to discredit the CNA's groundbreaking and courageous work in fighting for patient and nursing rights. Like the CNA nurses, nurses in Illinois determined three years ago to fight corporate restructuring, rather than "adapt" to the new healthcare environment, as the ANA had recommended. As we looked for assistance in developing a social and economic analysis of restructuring and a strategy to resist it, it was the CNA that responded to our calls.

They offered a sophisticated analysis which put restructuring into a political and global context, and they sent expert speakers to Illinois' nurses — as they have to other nurses throughout the country and the world — to educate R.N.s and tell them about the national media campaign they had developed to alert the public to the dangers of restructuring. They also responded by organizing national and international conferences that helped nurses join with other healthcare workers and consumer advocates, such as Ralph Nader, to fight against the corporate takeover of the U.S. healthcare system.

What was the ANA's response? They queried Illinois nursing leaders and nurse activists about why they were meeting with the nurses from the CNA, making it clear that such contact raised suspicions within "organized" nursing. Perhaps we of the Illinois Nursing Association should have heeded these queries because we recently

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learned that there was a price to pay for our collegial relationship with the CNA's activists.

One day before the INA's elections for statewide office, the ANA's president, Virginia Trotter Betts, outlined the CNA's so-called offenses and admonished INA members to be careful about the candidates for whom they were voting. Significantly, no CNA member was present to counter Ms. Betts' interpretation of events, and her warnings succeeded in intimidating many INA members into defeating their most forward-looking candidates.

Betts and the ANA leadership made the CNA's secession from the ANA the defining election issue — *not* hospital closures and downsizing, *not* the search of nurse-graduates for scarce jobs, *not* slashed government healthcare programs, and *not* record-breaking profits in the healthcare industry.

What was the struggle between the CNA and the ANA all about? And why should nurses around the country care about it? Simply, it involved two questions. The first asked how nurses viewed restructuring and the corporate takeover of healthcare. The CNA viewed restructuring as the product of an unbridled, profit-driven healthcare industry that, in spite of the pressing issues threatening nursing and the public welfare, was driven by a corporate imperative to increase profits and exercise control over all healthcare decisions: who is healthy, who provides care, and how is care provided?

The second of the CNA's differences with the ANA addressed how nurses can act on their own behalf, both individually and collectively. According to Ms. Betts, the ANA views restructuring as a sociological phenomenon to which nurses must adapt. But should nurses adapt to a maladaptive, inhumane healthcare environment and attempt or should they fight it? Should nurses train for the unspecified career "opportunities" they've been promised, or should they fight for recognition and respect? And why should nurses embrace a world in which "job security" is considered a naive, arcane concept, incompatible with corporate control and profit-taking in healthcare?

The CNA nurses looked at the facts and determined they would be better off independent of the ANA. An overwhelming number of the CNA's members voted for disaffiliation, which the ANA explained by saying that nurses in California didn't know any better. In other words, the same nurses

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who have the expertise to provide complex care under increasingly difficult working conditions are not capable, in the ANA's eyes, of understanding the complexities of the "new environment" in healthcare. Leave that "understanding" to the ANA!

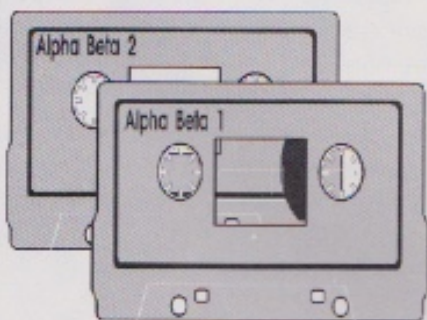
Currently, the ANA is engaged in a campaign to undermine the CNA's leadership. All nurses around the country have a stake in the success of the David-and-Goliath struggle the CNA has so intelligently and courageously taken on. The battle against corporate interests in healthcare is *not* a CNA battle alone. It belongs to all of nursing. We will all become stronger if the CNA succeeds, and immeasurably weakened if they do not.

Nursing history is being made in the mid-1990s. What will your role be in shaping that history?

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Synopsis - Throughout the country, nurses are questioning —and fighting against —the corporate takeover of nursing. But they're not getting any help from their national organization.