

At NYU Bellevue Hospital

WORKER-STUDENT ALLIANCE

by a group of NYU medical students

The Bellevue Hospital, New York University, medical complex extends from 23rd St. to 34th St., between First Avenue and the East River. Thousands of workers are employed here—by the federal government in the V.A. Hospital, by the N.Y.C. government in Bellevue Hospital, and by New York University at the University Hospital. In addition, 500 medical students attend school here. The different groups involved in this medical complex are as varied as their salaries. Nurses' aids may earn \$4,000-\$5,000 a year, while "professional" workers may earn \$10,000-\$12,000 a year. Students pay \$2,000 tuition a year. The interests of all these different groups run in many directions and at times conflict with one another. However, in an important way they have one thing in common—all groups objectively must fight the Administration to better their lives. For workers (blue or white collar) this means a struggle for higher wages in times of increasing taxes and costs of living, a struggle for better working conditions and fringe benefits. For students this means a struggle for a better curriculum and student rights.

In the last several months, two such struggles have come into the open. The first was a threatened student strike in December around curriculum demands and student meals at the hospital cafeteria. The second was a strike in late January at University Hospital by the engineering and maintenance workers, Local 810 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Although these actions arose independent of each other, it became evident after awhile that both were heading in the same

direction. At this point a basis was laid for a worker-student alliance against the Administration.

Before an account and analysis of the events is discussed, a few words should be said about the Administration. At this medical complex (or anywhere for that matter) whether the Administration is federal, city or private, makes little difference. In the first place, their attitude toward strikes is identical. In the national railroad strike, sanitation strike, or engineering and maintenance workers strike at University Hospital, the cries of the Administration are the same: "You're hurting the public interest! You're disrupting society!"

These same forces never question the Vietnam war, the taxes New Yorkers pay to bankers, or the exorbitant profits of New York University. These are really against the public interest. (If these Administrations are really interested in public interest instead of their own profits why don't they do anything about the rundown conditions at Bellevue?)

In the second place, the people who are in the various administrations have constant dealings with each other and rotate from one administration to the other. Thus, George E. Armstrong, M.D., presently Director of the New York University Medical Center, was previously U.S. Surgeon General and personal friend of Chiang-Kai-shek, a fascist and murderer of thousands of Chinese workers and peasants. Rusk, head of the Department of Rehabilitative Medicine, serves periodically as a U.S. government patsy by visiting Vietnam and claiming that the U.S. is not napalm bombing civilians. The Directors of New York University, largest private university in the world and second largest landlord in New York City, are also directors of large banks and companies. Some of them are:

NYU Board of Trustees

Frank W. Begrisch—Member of Advisory Board of Manufacturers Hanover Trust Co.; Director of Phillips Petroleum Company

Elmer H. Bobst—Chairman of the Board of Warner Lambert Pharmaceutical Co.

George A. Murphy (Chairman)—Chairman

of Irving Trust Co.; Director Distillers Co., Ltd.; General Cable Corporation; Commercial Union Fire Insurance Co.; Werner-Lambert Pharmaceutical Co.; Continental Can Co.; Federal Reserve Bank of New York

Medical Center Board

Frederick L. Ehrman (Vice Chairman)—Director of Executive Committee of Greyhound Corp.; Director Beekman Instruments, Inc.; Continental Air Lines, Inc.; United Financial Corp.

Lloyd W. Elliot (Vice Chairman)—Director of Standard Oil Company of N.J.

These banks make their money by extending loans to federal and city government and then charging high interest rates, which the people must pay for in taxes.

It is clear then that the Administration at the Bellevue - New York University Medical Center represents a definite class of people in this country. It is the class of bankers, landlords, and politicians who run this country and make their money not by working for it, but off people who do work for it. It is a class that pursues its interest with high taxes and high interest rates, and by suppressing the demands of workers—at home with laws, the courts, and the police; and in Vietnam with bombs and an army. When seen in this light, the struggles at New York University Medical Center are open class struggles and the worker-student alliance just begun here, and therefore still small, is the way to win.

The Threatened Student Strike

The student struggle erupted over the issues of free meals at Bellevue Hospital. The hospital has a cafeteria that is free for interns and residents. For a long time third-year medical students had eaten there. This was legitimate because the students do a lot of free work for the city. Since the city is constantly skimping on money when it comes to running the city hospital, there is not enough help around the hospital. Therefore the medical students have to perform duties that should be performed

by city employees. This results in overwork for the students, less time for learning, and inferior care for the patients. At Bellevue Hospital alone, medical students save the city one quarter to one half million dollars a year, at the expense of both the student and the patient.

In November, the city Administration instituted a further economy measure: no free meals for medical students. This was the straw that broke the camel's back. For several years the students had been fighting for curriculum changes that would allot more time for learning and less for working for the city, and, in general, to orient the teaching more toward patient care and away from research. The Administration had been using stalling tactics—tactics that also would be used against the workers. The Administration set up committees—student committees, faculty committees, and student-faculty committees. These made sure that the issues were lost in long hours of meetings and talks. Student action was averted by these tactics—temporarily!

When the meal issue came to a head, a group of ten students came together and put out a leaflet called "Student Meals and Student Action." The leaflet pointed out the connection between the meal issue and other, more significant problems, such as the curriculum and attitude of the Administration to the students. It also told how a group of medical students in the Bronx fought the same problem by uniting their efforts. The leaflet's conclusion was that "united action is necessary," and that "the Administration has a tendency to temporize unendingly."

Partly because of this leaflet and partly because of the arguments and discussions carried on by this group, an overwhelming majority voted to go on strike if their demands were not met quickly. This show of united action scared the Administration into very quick action. Within a week or two after this vote, the students demands were met.

What was the meaning of this victory? (1) It broke down some feelings of professionalism and showed the necessity for united action. In committees and negotiations the Administration

can procrastinate and maintain the status quo. And besides, talk is cheap. (2) For the first time, "radicals" at the school led a mass action. That is, most of the ten students who put out the leaflet had previously been involved in anti-war work, an activity that was isolated from the majority of other medical students. In the threatened student strike, these radicals were able to organize and win a struggle around local issues and clarify in their own mind the meaning of political action as being more than just marching and demonstrating. After all, the same ruling class which is waging a war on the Vietnamese people also creates the local issues against which both the students and workers fought.

Worker's Strike (or Lockout?)

The story of this struggle can best be told by quoting parts of leaflets put out by the workers, the Administration and the students throughout the struggle.

The first indication that trouble had been brewing for a long time was in a leaflet put out by the rank-and-file employees of the Engineering-Maintenance Department of University Hospital on January 16:

YOUR WELFARE IS AT STAKE, TOO

... We do not wish to see the health and well-being, indeed the very life of a single person put in jeopardy because of the stubborn and callous treatment we are receiving at the hands of the hospital Administration and its labor relations department.

Almost six months ago our Union, Local 810 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, was certified by the Labor Relations Board and we duly presented our proposals for a contract. We have been patient; we have made repeated efforts to reach a settlement. Our reward has been frustration and delays. We are blocked at every turn. We have not yet received a single meaningful offer from the hospital Administration and its labor relations department.

And our grievances are of long standing. For fifteen years we have worked for the hospital, doing the work of skilled building trades workers but only getting a fraction of building trades workers' pay. For fifteen years we worked under contracts about which we had nothing to say. Now we are part of a great democratic Union and we will not follow the same path the Administration has led us in the past.

If because of the uncompromising position of the hospital Administration, an emergency should arise—and we hope and pray that it will not—we will provide men to stand by and provide all essential services ...

This leaflet which heralded the coming struggle put forward the feeling of the workers. However, it had very little effect on the students, who at this time did not see any connection between the labor dispute and their own lives. Two weeks later, on January 31, when coming to school, the students saw the workers picketing in front of the hospital. In their mailboxes the students found a letter from the Administration (the letter had also been sent out to all other workers at the hospital who weren't on strike).

TO: ALL STUDENTS

Last night, January 30, 1968, at 9:00 P.M., negotiations between Medical Center negotiators and Local 810 of the Teamsters, representing the plant and maintenance staff at the Medical Center, were disrupted by a walkout and the initiation of a strike on the part of the Teamsters. The walkout occurred at the New York State Board of Medication in the presence of the State mediator assigned to the case.

This strike by the Teamsters is in violation of the New York State law which prohibits strikes, walkouts and work stoppages in hospitals.

During the course of negotiations, the Medical Center made substantial offers in the area of wages, benefits and other conditions of work. These offers are a matter of public record with the Board of Mediations and reflect the extent to which the Medical Center has gone to provide a fair and equitable settlement and avoid labor difficulties. No response to the Medical Center's last offers was made by the Teamsters...

Your cooperation in maintaining your normal routine in this emergency will be greatly appreciated.

(This last sentence was a request for scabs. The strikers, however, had already requested that other hospital workers cross the picket lines so that patients wouldn't suffer. Other Teamsters, however, refused to cross the picket lines and make deliveries, effectively shutting the hospital off from the outside.)

It was this leaflet from the Administration that started to move the students. Among the same group were students who saw the Administration's leaflet for what it was—an attempt to co-opt the students to side with the Administration against the workers. What was very

clear was the arrogance of the Administration in presenting themselves as all good and the workers as all bad and thinking they could win the students over with such a line. It is important to note that what first got the students moving was not sympathy with the workers as much as antagonism against the Administration. Students recognized the old underhanded and evasive manner of the Administration, which they had had to deal with for so long in their own struggles. (A few days later, the workers were sent back to work by a court injunction under Labor Law 716, appended to the Taylor Law.) A few students went out to talk to the workers on the picket lines. The students then put out the following leaflet:

TO: MEMBERS OF NYU MEDICAL CENTER

On Jan. 31 the Administration sent a letter to all staff and students concerning the present hospital labor dispute. They claimed that members of Teamsters' Local 810, the plant and maintenance workers of the Medical Center, initiated the recent strike and failed to respond to offers made for a new contract. They asked for "cooperation in maintaining a business-as-usual routine." Then on Feb. 2 the administration sent another letter stating that the labor dispute "has been referred by mutual consent to voluntary and binding arbitration."

Anyone who wishes to talk to the workers will hear their side of the story, which includes the following:

1. The last contract expired July 1, 1967, at which time 89 out of the 96 workers voted for representation by the Teamsters' Union. They claim that the Administration does not want such a strong union and for 6 months has not signed a contract with the union.

2. The workers feel they have a long record of service here and that they have lower salaries than workers in comparable jobs in New York City. Their average salary is \$30-\$40 a week less than the average salaries of plant and maintenance workers at the Albert Einstein Medical Center. There is no nighttime differential paid here. In many cases there is no increment in pay for overtime work. The present retirement pension at age 65 is only \$45 a month. Yet, these workers have the smallest turnover of any group in the Medical Center and have shown good faith by working for the past 7 months without a contract.

3. On Jan. 30 when the 4 P.M. shift came on duty, the workers were locked out; the administration confiscated the keys to the hospital plant. This took place while negotiations were going on. During the next 5 hours the workers watched 16 supply trucks being unloaded in back of the hospital. They interpreted this as a sign that the hospital was stockpiling goods. At 9:30 P.M. they formed a picket line. They claim to have been forced out of work against their wishes and to have volunteered

their services in any emergency. The administration responded by seeking and receiving a court injunction against the workers for not working. The workers feel that the administration is trying to break the union in this manner.

4. The fact is that "mutual consent" is not responsible for the arbitration. The workers have been forced back to work under court injunction, and if they want to continue bargaining must submit to compulsory arbitration under New York Law #716. Perhaps this was the foreseen result of the lockout.

The administration has sent us a perfunctory and incomplete report of this situation, hoping in this way to obtain our cooperation in their policies. They have rejected a request by the workers to use the Medical Center mails to present the workers' side. We object to being sent a misleading letter that excludes the workers' point of view and that attempts to elicit our sympathy without a full discussion of the whole situation...

This leaflet was put out by five students, had the active support of another fifteen students, and also was actively received and circulated by a small group of "professional" workers at the University Hospital. Most students reacted to the leaflet with apathy; a few isolated cases of hostility occurred; and a small but significant number of students reacted favorably to the leaflet. The arguments that did arise concerned the question of "What business is this of mine?" The answer was, "The Administration is trying to dupe you now just as it tried to dupe you with its stalling tactics in the curriculum and meal issue." It became obvious that attack on the Administration and support for the workers was far from a mass movement among the students, and, in fact, represented a small isolated movement, mainly of radicals. Nevertheless, the workers strongly welcomed the leaflet and efforts of the small group of students, and several friendly contacts were made between the workers and students.

Since the strike was broken by a court injunction on February 2, the State Board of Mediation submitted a panel of five arbitrators and asked that each side select three, of which one would be designated by the State Board to arbitrate all unresolved issues. Local 810 immediately named three as asked. But the Administration and its legal staff rejected all five! This then happened a second time. Perhaps the Administration is afraid to open its books on its "non-profit" hospital. Presently, negotiations between the Administration and the

workers are going on. The Administration is using its usual stalling tactics, such as talking all day about whether the workers can put up a bulletin board, and even being so arrogant as to question the right of the rank and file to pick their own shop stewards! The Administration seems worried and is trying to put the screws on the workers. For the first time in New York University labor history, a rank-and-file movement has taken an independent stand, broken with the old "company union," relied on their own strength, and persistently demanded a decent contract. Already the workers have been working for 8 months without a contract. Instead of getting more discouraged, they are becoming more and more angry, and refuse to buckle under. (Even a strike against the court injunction is being talked about. This would be fine. Every shovelful of dirt used to bury strikebreaking legislation is more than welcome.)

NYU Worker-Student Alliance Critique-Perspective

Several years ago, a radical medical student was arrested because he demonstrated in Times Square against the war in Vietnam. When he told the school Administration about it, they weren't upset at all, and even though the medical student was outspoken in his views, they were not going to expel or punish him in any way. "Only one thing," they said, "stay away from the workers. Don't sell them literature or get involved with them in any way." The Administration realized that as long as the student radical movement is isolated, it's not really effective. But if it ever overcomes its isolation among students, and then allies itself with workers, a very "dangerous" force (to the Administration) is formed.

The small group of students that put out the leaflet knew that the Administration was worried about any alliance between workers and students. This generated a fear of expulsion among the group. This fear greatly affected the issuing of the leaflet. The group procrastinated for over a week, argued over petty words, and even after it was finally printed made no plans to give it out in an organized way. But it was

not only fear of the Administration (and fear of lack of student support) which hampered the efforts of the group. Also, there was a lack of clarity in the group about the issues involved. Questions kept arising, such as "Are we sure we have all the facts? Maybe the workers' story isn't really correct either. How do we know if it's a lockout or if the workers had been threatening to strike all along? After all, the Teamsters are far from angels." The root of these questions and the confusions rising from them was the lack of a definite class point of view. That is, students and intellectuals consider themselves "objective" and want to judge each situation by itself. By looking at this labor dispute as an isolated case, the N.Y.U. medical students wanted to judge whether each side was "fair," using some abstract principles of morality. In reality, however, all judgments rest on one of two viewpoints: either (1) the Administration (and the bankers and politicians they represent) have a right to make money off underpaid workers and use legislation to break strikes and keep this privilege, or (2) the workers have a right to join together, elect a militant union to represent them, and fight for what they know they need to live on today. (Even the U.S. government says a family of four in New York City needs \$10,000 a year to live comfortably.)

If the first viewpoint is taken, then students become liberals. That is, they accept the premise that bosses have a right to exploit and break strikes but that they should be "nice" to the workers. If the second viewpoint is taken, the working-class point of view, then the details of a particular strike and which side is being fair is irrelevant. What is relevant is the fact that workers at the Medical Center in the U.S. or anywhere in the world, are uniting together and fighting the Administrations, bosses, and politicians for a way of life that is run according to the needs of themselves and their families, not according to which way makes the most profits.

The future of the worker-student alliance at the Bellevue - N.Y.U. Medical Center from the students' point of view must overcome the two

obstacles mentioned above, which hampered their first steps. In order to overcome their fear of the Administration, they must work to overcome their isolation as radicals from the rest of the students. This means organizing and fighting around local bread-and-butter issues which will be mass struggles, as well as more advanced issues, such as the war in Vietnam and the worker-student alliance. The advanced issues will not have mass support at first; but radicals cannot maintain themselves on advanced issues alone. As seen above, not only did an organizational form rise out of the mass student struggle; more important, a momentum and a certain strength and spirit helped the radicals fight on the worker-student alliance.

In order to fight on many issues—from the war in Vietnam to the "meal" issue at Bellevue—student radicals must have a clear point of view. Otherwise, they will become confused, sometimes fighting on the right side, other times on the wrong side. The only point of view that can put the war in Vietnam, the draft, the lousy city hospitals, and the strikebreaking legislation in correct perspective, is a working-class point of view. The success or failure of the student movement at N.Y.U., or anywhere else, depends on its ability to take sides. A working-class ideology comes not only from study, but also by allying with workers in struggles against their common opponent. Students must further realize that only workers have the power to oppose the Administrations, bosses and politicians. Students must then convince working people of their ideas if they want their ideas to be more than pipe dreams.

Although the recent struggles at the Medical Center have not been large in terms of absolute numbers of immediate effects, they are important first steps in the right direction. The future at the Medical Center is bound to be a stormy one. A new union of "professional" workers is being organized, and interns and residents at Bellevue are talking of striking for higher wages and better conditions at the hospital. The Vietnam war continues its slow, relentless wearing down of resources and manpower, further worsening the health problem in this country and sharpening the conflicts be-

tween the workers and students and the Administration. Whether this future stormy course is going to be no more than sporadic uprisings with unconnected demands or is going to grow into a strong movement depends on the formation of a worker-student alliance with a clear-cut viewpoint, sharpened ideas, and demands for a social system based not on the desires of the money-makers, but on the needs of workers and students.



IF YOU WANT
A REVOLUTION,
FORGET ABOUT
THE WORKERS,
MAN! THEY
DRINK BEER,
RIDE AROUND
IN RAMBLERS
AND ARE FAT
FROM WEALTH!



WORKERS OF
THE MIND ARE
THE ONLY ONES
WHO'LL BRING
REVOLUTION,
LIKE CATS WHO
WORK FOR IBM.
TECHNOCRATS,
MAN! TECHNO-
CRATS ARE
THE NEW
REVOLUTIONA-
RIES!



ALL YOU
NEED IS JUST
A FEW
DEDICATED
TECHNOCRATS



...JUST A FEW
DEDICATED
TECHNOCRATS
WHO'LL GO
INTO THE
MOUNTAINS,
EAT LITTLE
BIRDS & WILD
CELERY & RUN
AROUND IN
SNEAKERS.



ME? I'M A
TECHNOCRAT
... THE NEW
BREED OF
REVOLUTION-
ARY!



I'M GOING
INTO THE
MOUNTAINS.
— IF MY
MOTHER
WILL
RAISE MY
ALLOWANCE!

—reprinted from Challenge