

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CATHY WURZER: I mentioned the Minnesota nurses' strike. Nurses are picketing this week at 16 hospitals in the Twin Cities and the Twin Ports. It's the largest nurses' strike in Minnesota history. Union organizers say it's the largest strike of nurses in US history. It made us think about where this strike fits in history and what it means right now two years into a worldwide pandemic.

Peter Radcliffe is on the line right now. He's co-executive director of the East Side Freedom Library in St. Paul and a retired history professor at Macalester College, specializing in labor history. Professor, it's always a pleasure. Welcome back to the show.

PETER RADCLIFFE: Thank you, Cathy. Glad to be here.

CATHY WURZER: I know you've been following strikes for years and years. The Minnesota nurses' strike of 2010 comes to mind. About 12,000 nurses at that point. That was called the largest nurses strike in history then. At the time, it was so prolonged, you remember, there was talk of getting the National Guard out. Why do you think we're back here again?

PETER RADCLIFFE: Well I think that the pandemic has really demonstrated the fault lines in the American healthcare system. It's not just a question of the 16 hospitals here in Minnesota that are being struck. There's a strike going on right now in Wisconsin, there's a strike going on right now in the state of California. Again, nurses and mental health workers. The pandemic has both put stress on the system and demonstrated the fragility of the system that we have. And it's going to take a really large solution to prevent these kinds of conflicts in the future.

CATHY WURZER: When you look back at history, and I know you do so often, are there any corollaries between this strike and others in the past?

PETER RADCLIFFE: Sure. I think that here in Minnesota, in our history, there have been several strikes that have been bellwethers for how the national labor system and the national political economy is going. In the spring of 1894, railroad workers on the Great Northern Railroad struck against James J. Hill in a strike that involved about 10,000 workers. And by June of that year, had grown to 125,000 workers on railroad systems all over the United States.

That led, among other things, to the establishment of Labor Day as a national holiday. In 1934, truck drivers and warehouse workers in Minneapolis went on strike-- actually went on three strikes-- in February, in the early summer, and in the late summer. And the real outcome of those strikes was the passage of the National Labor Relations Act in 1935. The whole national labor relations system shifted as a result of those strikes in Minneapolis.

And in 1985 to '86, Hormel workers in Austin, Minnesota, struck in a strike that became the symbol of the shift in the American political economy from the demand-driven Keynesianism of the 1940s through the late 1970s, to the more supply-side profit-focused top down system that's been called neoliberalism that has continued to dominate the American political economy since the Reagan administration of the 80s.

So these have all been moments where labor conflict in Minnesota has had a national echo, has had a national impact, has left its imprint for decades after each of these struggles as to how the American system of labor relations would be understood and practiced.

CATHY WURZER: So I wonder what may materialize potentially when it comes to any lasting changes from this right labor strike, right? Earlier this morning on Morning Edition, I talked with a Rutgers University professor who said something interesting. She said, doctors bring in money, nurses cost money. To give nurses what they want, do you think there needs to be some sort of fundamental redistribution of spending in order to pay for nurses more? Doctors and administrators maybe get paid less or differently?

PETER RADCLIFFE: Well, I think that the nurses' union is pointing to the inequities in the system that has led to considerable wealth ending up in the hands of hospital administrators. So I'm not sure about the balance between doctors and nurses. But it does seem like the balance between administrators and care providers, whether they are nurses or LPNs or nurses assistants or other workers who provide that hands-on care for patients. But I think we really need to have a conversation about, what would be a humane and socially appropriate healthcare system?

This would be a good time Cathy, I think to talk to John Marty, who has been an advocate for decades for restructuring the healthcare system both in Minnesota and nationally. And I think John's voice could be a very valuable voice in these conversations.

CATHY WURZER: And of course, we're talking about State Senator John Marty.

PETER RADCLIFFE: Yes.

CATHY WURZER: Professor, I've got a couple of minutes left. As know, there's vocal opposition in some quarters to unions. A group of nurses in a Mayo clinic facility in Mankato, as you know, recently voted the union out, the M&A. What do you make of that move versus this strike?

PETER RADCLIFFE: Well, I think that administrators in the hospitals have been quite dug in in their resistance to nurses having a collective voice in how healthcare is delivered and how workers are compensated.

In the case of the Mayo clinic, the role played by the National Right To Work Committee in providing attorneys and advising the Mayo Clinic is a very important part of the story. This is an ideological resistance to collective bargaining and worker representation. And it needs to be evaluated through that lens.

CATHY WURZER: And before you go, what will you be watching for here in the next days and weeks to come when it comes to the nurses' strike?

PETER RADCLIFFE: I think public opinion is the critical factor here. The nurses' picket lines, their signs, their opportunities to express themselves through the media. The most important audience is not the hospital administrators. The most important audience is the general public. How do we understand what's happening in our healthcare system? What lessons can we learn from the pandemic? How can we create a more humane system?

We need to hear more from John Q. Public or whatever the feminine gendered version of John Q. Public is. We need to hear from ordinary people who are themselves patients who depend on the healthcare system. I want to just quickly add, Cathy, that-- and I was saying to your producer Gretchen-- that there was recently a study published that there are 100 million Americans who owe medical debt. 100 million of us.

Far more than those who owe student loans. So what's cockeyed about a system that leaves 100 million people in debt after they've been sick or injured and have sought care? We need to have a big conversation about our healthcare system.

CATHY And maybe the strike opens that door. I appreciate your time, as always. It is. Thank you, Professor. Take good
WURZER: care.

PETER You too, Cathy.
RADCLIFFE:

CATHY Peter Ratcliffe is co-executive director of the East Side Freedom Library, retired professor of labor history at
WURZER: Macalester College. Of course, we'll continue coverage of the nurses' strike on the air and on our website, mprnews.org.