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POLITICS

Nurses Make a House Call

Doctors don't make house calls anymore, but later today (Thursday) more than a thousand registered nurses will be visiting Meg Whitman's house in tony Atherton, California to protest the Republican candidate for governor's attacks on patient safety, health care reform, and workers' rights.

Sponsored by the feisty California Nurses Association (CNA), the rally will begin at 12:30 pm at Whitman's \$3.2 million home at 24 Edge Road in Atherton, a northern California suburb with 7,500 residents that is the nation's second wealthiest community, with an average household income of \$341,129. CNA will also sponsor a 1:30 pm forum at Canada College in nearby Redwood City.

Whitman, the former CEO of eBay, has made attacks on unions - and particularly CNA -- a centerpiece of her campaign against Jerry Brown, the current state attorney general who is trying to regain the governor's job he held from 1975 to 1983.

Whitman, who has never run for office before and even failed to vote in many elections, has already spent more than \$90 million, most of it from her own pocket, to win the Republican nomination in June. She's vowed to contribute as much as \$120 million to win the race, which would set a new record for self contributions in any American political campaign. She will certainly outspend Brown by a wide margin.

Her TV ads have boosted her name recognition and put her neck-and-neck with Brown, according to recent polls. A new Whitman ad attacks "the unions and special interests behind Jerry Brown." Like the rest of the California labor movement, CNA has endorsed Brown and donated funds for his campaign, but Whitman has singled out CNA for its aggressive opposition to her candidacy.

For months, CNA members have appeared at the billionaire's campaign events and fundraisers with a "Queen Meg" character, along with a crown, royal entourage, and signs that read "Rich enough to rule" and "Only The Rich Deserve Health Care."

CNA has also created a "Queen Meg" [Facebook page](#) as part of its anti-Whitman campaign. The union has also purchased ads on Spanish-language radio stations to remind Latinos of her immigrant-bashing ads during the Republican primary, including opposition to admitting undocumented students to state-funded universities.

CNA has criticized Whitman's corporate practices at eBay as well as her conservative positions on business regulation, immigration, health care, and other issues. CNA president Rose Ann DeMoro says that Whitman has "declared war on working people."

In June, Whitman wrote an open letter demanding that CNA provide her campaign with the home addresses of its members so she could send them campaign literature. After CNA rejected her request, Whitman purchased a list of all the state's approximately 370,000 registered nurses and mailed flyers attacking the union's leadership.

CNA invited Whitman to attend a public question-and-answer session on health care and other issues, but she turned down the offer.

Whitman's attack on CNA isn't without political risks. The union is very popular, reflecting both the public's positive attitude toward nurses in general and CNA's own feisty activism and pro-patient stances.

CNA is militant in its union organizing efforts as well as its political work in promoting progressive candidates and policies. Its membership has grown from 17,000 in 1992 to 86,000 this year. Two years ago, CNA began building a national nurses union, recruiting new members at major hospital chains in Texas, Minnesota, and other states. It joined with several other nurse groups in other states to form a new organization, National Nurses United, which now has 155,000 members.

CNA first gained its Doreen-versus-Goliath reputation in 1999, when it scored its initial major victory by getting Gov. Gray Davis, a moderate Democrat, to sign the nation's first law that limits the number of hospital patients assigned to each nurse, a formula that improves the quality of care -- a finding recently confirmed by a [University of Pennsylvania study](#). Despite this, the state's powerful hospital lobby opposed the law then and still does. In 2005, Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger picked a fight with CNA by trying to end the patient-to- nurse ratio law. CNA fought back, playing a key role in the labor movement's successful campaign to oppose all the Schwarzenegger-backed conservative ballot initiatives. Two days later, the Terminator terminated his lawsuit against the nursing law.

CNA is concerned that Whitman might try to undermine their hard-won legislative victory. During her GOP primary campaign, in which Whitman took increasingly right-wing positions in order to attract hardcore GOP voters, she refused to take a position on the ratio law, which CNA considered a not-too-subtle way of opposing it. But since winning the primary, she's stated that she supports the law, which is popular among most voters in this heavily Democratic state.

In April, Whitman further angered CNA when she called on Brown to join 13 other state attorneys general (12 of them Republicans) to sue the federal government to block implementation of the federal health care reform law passed by Congress the month before. Brown refused. CNA was a strong advocate for a Canada-style single-payer health care system, but it views the new federal law as a possible steppingstone to a bolder approach.

Although most of CNA's members work for private hospitals, they've joined forces with the rest of the labor movement and other liberal groups in attacking Whitman's plan to lay off 40,000 state workers and slash \$15 billion from the state budget, which would result in cuts to pensions, health care services, welfare, and other programs. CNA also opposes Whitman's ideas to weaken business and workplace regulations, such as overtime pay and meal-and-rest-break requirements. CNA and other unions also support, and Whitman opposes, a \$43 billion San Francisco-to-Los Angeles high-speed rail project that is popular for its potential to create jobs, stimulate the economy, and reduce traffic congestion and pollution. Whitman's hometown of Atherton joined a handful of other wealthy Peninsula towns in asking the state to halt the project. Labor activists say that Whitman's proposals would sink California even deeper into recession.

The California Labor Federation (CLF) recently released a video, available on YouTube and on its [WallStreetWhitman.com website](http://WallStreetWhitman.com), revealing how Whitman advanced her career at companies like Stride Rite, Hasbro, FTD, and eBay by firing workers and outsourcing their jobs.

According to the CLF, Whitman gained fame and fortune at eBay's CEO from 1998 to 2007, during which the company dramatically increased the number of overseas employees. While at eBay, Whitman received about \$500 million in compensation and stock options and used a company jet that cost the company (and shareholders) nearly \$3.2 million.

Whitman also served on the board of directors of Goldman Sachs, which paid her \$475,000 for her service. She resigned from the board in 2002 after questions were raised about whether Goldman gave her insider access to stocks that she flipped quickly for big profits as a quid-pro-quo for giving Goldman eBay's banking business. This practice, called "spinning," is now illegal. She was also a member of Goldman Sachs' executive compensation committee, which OK'd \$79 million in executive bonuses. The Wall Street investment bank is now under investigation by the US Department of Justice for its role in the mortgage crisis that resulted in millions of home foreclosures.

From 2003-2006, Whitman was on the board of Gap Inc, the clothing company targeted by human rights activists for its overseas sweatshop and outsourcing of jobs.

As part of its anti-Whitman efforts, CNA has hammered her for her settlement with an eBay staffer whom Whitman "physically escorted" out of a conference room after a dispute in 2007.

The *New York Times* reported last month about the altercation. According to the [Times story](#), an eBay communications staffer, Young Mi Kim, was preparing Whitman for a media interview, when the CEO got angry and "forcefully pushed her." Kim threatened a lawsuit, but agreed to a legal settlement totaling about \$200,000.

The union supports demands by some eBay shareholders for records about the incident and any others like it that might expose the company to financial claims. They say that Whitman shoved her subordinate. Whitman says it was a verbal dispute.

"Our members are coming to deliver a message to her," said Malinda Markowitz, an RN and CNA's co-president about today's protest at Whitman's home. "RNs and CNA will not be pushed around or bullied like one of her subordinates or subjects."

CNA's membership isn't large enough to swing an election in this populous state, but its credibility among voters and the visibility of its anti-Whitman efforts has clearly rattled Whitman's campaign. It hired a Texas polling company to conduct its own survey of nurses. On Tuesday, it released a four-page letter it was sending to nurses, inviting them to join a new advisory panel on nursing issues. She also set up her own [nurse-oriented website](#) to counter CNA's attacks.

Whitman obviously hopes to drive a wedge between what she called CNA's "radical leadership" and rank-and-file nurses. But Californians view CNA as a pro-consumer groups as well as labor organization. If anything, CNA's popularity may help to soften the public's image of the labor movement in general, which could be a useful bulwark against the growing attacks by Republicans and conservatives on "big labor," particularly public sector unions, whom they blame for the state's budget crisis.

In addition to winning better pay and retirement security for nurses, and helping pass the patient-nurse ratio law, CNA has helped enact whistleblower protections for caregivers who expose unsafe hospital conditions, and increased funding for nursing education.

In anticipation of today's protest, the Atherton Police Department plans to close streets in the areas near Whitman's home. "The Police Department will attempt to accommodate residents who wish to access their homes on these streets," according to the local newspaper, "but will not allow traffic which can reasonably use alternate routes." The Whitman campaign said that the candidate won't be at home when the nurses arrive, but will be meeting with employees of the Maglite Flashlights Corp. in Ontario, in southern California.

It will be interesting to see if more TV cameras and newspaper reporters show up for the CNA protest or the Whitman photo op.

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