Hospital workers strike spreads throughout France

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The strike by French hospital workers against the Macron administration's healthcare legislation, which came into force in March, is spreading throughout the country. Of the 478 emergency services in the country, 216 are now involved in the movement that began in March and involved 80 hospitals by June.

The urgent care nurses and assistants are opposing Health Bill 2022 and the systematic deterioration of conditions for staff and patients that has been implemented over decades. Driven by spending cuts and the demands for "competitiveness," hospital directors are implementing ever-more destructive cost-cutting measures, creating shortages of doctors and temporarily closing services.

Confronted with growing anger, Health Minister Agnès Buzyn contemptuously announced 70 million euros in additional funding, assigned to increase by 100 euros per month the bonus paid to emergency staff to account for the inherent physical dangers of the work. This did not calm the anger of the workers, who are demanding 10,000 additional jobs, a wage increase of 300 euros net per month, and an end to all bed closures.

Buzyn had to flee the hospital at La Rochelle on July 12, after being pursued by a group of protesting workers. Buzyn, who knows the hospital well from her work there as a doctor, had supposedly gone to assess the mood of staff over the conditions in the facility.

Between 1996 and 2016, the number of people treated in the country's emergency care services increased from 10 million to 21 million. In 2018, according to SAMU-Urgences de France, 180,000 patients spent a night on a stretcher in the hallways of the urgent care wards.

At the Sainte-Foy-la-Grande hospital in northern Gironde, for example, the emergency service has been closed between 6:30 p.m. and 8:30 a.m. from August 1 to 31. Patients requiring care during these night hours are redirected to the Bergerac hospital in the Dordogne, about 20 kilometers away.

Because of a shortage of doctors, the Pithiviers hospital cancelled its mobile care unit, the Mobile Emergency and Resuscitation Service (SMUR), for 18 days, giving priority to its on-site services instead. The SMUR units of Montargis and Orléans are taking on the additional responsibilities, with longer intervention times as a result, as they too are struggling to recruit doctors over the summer.

According to Vincent Authié, a stretcher bearer and delegate for the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) trade union: "It's true that we are in a region particularly affected by doctor shortages, but the management anticipates nothing. It does not make plans for staff schedules. We have known for a long time that there would be a problem." The staff of the hospital joined the national protest movement at the beginning of the summer.

The emergency department of Beaumont-sur-Oise Hospital has joined the national strike movement. There are about 70 per cent of workers listed as participating in the strike movement among paramedical staff, although the service is continuing to operate.

The World Socialist Web Site recently spoke with Emilie, a nurse's assistant with seven years in Paris, about the growing strike movement. "The lack of staff is a major problem," she explained. "There are more and more people who come to urgent care, but we have kept the same number of staff. There is always a long wait, so we have seen an increase in aggressive patients because when you are forced to wait a long time, and you don't understand why, that's what happens. The waiting time has increased from four to six hours to

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between eight and ten."

"We need more staff, more nurses, more health assistants, more doctors. When people arrive, there are no places for them. I start the night shift at 9 p.m., and half the beds are occupied, so we have only seven left free and then we start putting people on stretchers.

"The government does not want to hire anyone. The Macron government says there are 'too many public sector workers.' So staff retire and are not replaced. For some things, there is plenty of money—but for important things like health, there's not. When the government members are sick, they don't have to wait, they have the best healthcare."

At present, the organization of the protest movement is in the hands of the Interurgences collective, a politically heterogeneous organization that includes many emergency workers. The decision of the emergency workers to build this organization to organize opposition reflects the widespread distrust of the union apparatus, with which the leadership of the Interurgences nevertheless maintain numerous ties.

The ruling class is aware of the discrediting of the union apparatus among hospital staff and the danger that workers' opposition could develop outside of the unions' control and become a broader pole of working class opposition. In an editorial this week, *Le Monde* called on the Macron government to quickly bring an end to the crisis: "Rather than playing the war of attrition, there is an urgent need to take action to find a solution to the crisis before tragedies occur," it noted.

The struggle by emergency workers in France is part of an international resurgence of class struggle that is increasingly becoming a political struggle against capitalist government around the world, waged independently of the trade unions. The wave of working class struggles includes the strikes of American teachers, Mexican maquiladora workers, Polish educators and workers in Portugal, Germany and Belgium against austerity, as well as the "yellow vest" protests in France and the powerful movements of the Algerian and Sudanese masses to bring down the military regimes in those countries.

It is essential for healthcare workers to systematically and consciously prevent the union apparatus from having any control over their struggle. The unions have negotiated reactionary attacks with Macron, sabotaged a fight against Macron's destruction of the Labour Code and privatization of the railway network, and isolated the struggles by workers in France from their European and international counterparts. In hospitals, the unions are involved in restructuring services to make them more competitive. They are working to isolate the hospital workers' strike from all other workers and the "yellow vest" movement.

The Macron administration's assault on healthcare is part of a broader attack on all the social rights of the working class by the corporate and financial elite. Public healthcare is one of the concessions obtained by the European working class after the Second World War. The ruling class is working to dismantle all of these social achievements won through bitter struggles. The starvation of hospital funding over several decades is part of this process.

The way forward is for workers to take their struggle out of the hands of the union apparatuses and wage their fight independently. This means unifying with other sections of workers coming into struggle in France and internationally, including the "yellow vests," and the development of a political struggle against the Macron administration based on a socialist perspective for the overthrow of capitalism.

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