“We cannot abandon the nurses”

Nurse suicides rise in Europe amid stress of COVID-19 pandemic

Allison Smith
31 March 2020

Last week, 34-year-old nurse Daniella Trezzi, who worked in the COVID-19 intensive care ward of San Gerardo hospital at Monza, near Milan, learned that she had been infected with the disease. Distraught at the idea that she could have spread the coronavirus to others before she learned that she carried the disease, and facing the relentless working conditions at a hospital in the epicenter of the pandemic in Europe, Trezzi tragically committed suicide.

The National Federation of Italian Nurses (FNOPI) said in a brief statement about her death that Ms. Trezzi and many nurses treating quarantined patients showing COVID-19 symptoms feel “heavy stress for fear of having infected others.” The Federation noted the “pain and dismay” of its members “at the news of her death.”

Trezzi had studied at the Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca and lived with her dog in Brugherio. She leaves behind a brother and many friends and colleagues. Her Facebook page, which was still accessible yesterday, made clear her love of nature and travel and her dedication to her chosen profession.

In the wake of Trezzi’s suicide, the FNOPI implored: “Each of us has chosen this profession for good and, unfortunately, also for bad: we are nurses. And nurses, all nurses, never leave anyone alone, even at risk—and this is evident—of their own lives. But that’s enough: we must not, we cannot, abandon the nurses.”

This tragedy points to the terrible human cost not only of the COVID-19 pandemic, but of decades of social austerity policies that have left hospitals across Europe understaffed, overworked and without life-saving protection equipment like masks to shield medical staff from the contagion.

Now, amid the greatest global pandemic since the Spanish flu of 1918–1919, millions of nurses and medical professionals internationally are working around the clock with little or no protective gear. Across Europe tens of thousands of medical staff have contracted the disease, and health workers represent a staggering one in eight of Spain’s now 85,195 COVID-19 cases. They share images of exhausted colleagues, as hospitals buckle under the stress of treating thousands of COVID-19 intensive care patients each day.

Medical staff undergo unbearable stress, helplessly watching COVID-19 patients die alone. Dr. Francesca Cortellaro, head of the emergency room of the Borromeo hospital, told Euronews: “Do you see the emergency room? COVID-19 patients enter alone, no relatives can attend, and when they are about to leave they sense it. They are lucid, they do not go to narcolepsy.”

The stress is intensified by the contradictory messages and policies from European governments, which repeatedly made false comparisons of COVID-19 to seasonal flu to downplay the illness and try to force workers back to work to boost corporate profits in the middle of the pandemic.

Monica Trombetta, a nurse working in Como, near Monza, told the press: “We’re very tired and afraid. Government decrees change every day. Personnel does not have clear guidelines for dealing with this new virus and feel a little abandoned—not by our hospital, but it’s just as a general feeling. Nurses are afraid to go home and potentially infect their relatives.”

Nurses—who by the very nature of their job, spend the most time with patients—are particularly vulnerable to suicidal feelings. Nurse suicides have become a global

© World Socialist Web Site

epidemic, with US female and male nurses committing suicide at rates of 11.97 and 39.8 per 100,000 respectively last year, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. In their extremely high-pressure environment, demands for optimal performance are a decisive factor in intensifying feelings of distress and depression.

In Britain, a young nurse in her 20s working at King's College Hospital in London took her own life while treating COVID-19 patients last week. Her colleagues found her unresponsive in her ward, and doctors were unable to resuscitate her. Her next of kin have been notified, but the hospital did not release her identity.

Several British hospital trusts are reporting that up to 50 percent of their medical staff are at home, sick with COVID-19, leaving remaining staff wondering who will look after them and the massive daily influx of COVID-19 patients if they too fall ill with the virus.

Having infected hundreds of thousands of people, COVID-19 is ravaging hospitals in all of Europe. This exposes the malignant neglect of European officials for the fate of the broad mass of working people. Chancellor Angela Merkel called for Germans to accept that 70 to 80 percent of the population would get sick, and British officials calling for Britons to develop "herd immunity" by infecting almost the entire population with coronavirus. Based on these policies, they pressed for workers to continue working to churn out profits for big corporations.

Such proposals, which entail hundreds of millions catching COVID-19, would provoke a crisis hundreds or thousands of times more severe than the horrors already being visited on the population and health staff of northern Italy and other hard-hit regions. That such proposals are advanced by leading European governments make clear the political and moral degeneracy of the existing social system, and the callous indifference of the ruling class to the human tragedies that are unfolding.

Also last week in Italy, a 49-year-old nurse who worked in the COVID-19 ward of Jesolo hospital committed suicide, throwing herself into the Piave river in Cortellazzo, in the region of Venice.

The nurse, whose initials are S.L., had courageously volunteered to work with coronavirus patients and helped convert the Jesolo hospital into a COVID-19-only ward. S.L. lived alone and was at home for two days with fever, awaiting the results of a COVID-19 test, when she took her own life.

Paying his respects to S.L., her hospital director said: "She was a person dedicated to work, an irreplaceable resource for colleagues and for this health authority. Not by chance, as soon as we heard the news of her disappearance, colleagues at the hospital in Jesolo, who are busy these days on the coronavirus front, were deeply affected and shaken by the event. I express my deepest condolences and closeness to the family of 'our nurse' S.L."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site