

Nurses across the US demand equipment for protection against COVID-19

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The United States has registered over 325,000 cases of COVID-19 infections with the number of people who have died approaching 10,000. New York state, and specifically New York City, remains the epicenter of the pandemic, with cases continuing to rise rapidly, further straining an inundated healthcare infrastructure.

Michigan, New Jersey, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Illinois, and Florida are expected to see surges as the contagion spreads from community to community, hitting the hardest poor communities in large urban centers where access to healthcare was extremely limited before the outbreak. New York City has over 16,000 people hospitalized, over 4,000 in the ICUs, and approximately 1,600 patients intubated.

It has now been established by several reports that the Trump administration had squandered more than two months' time in inventorying and updating the national stockpile of medical equipment. Federal agencies waited until the middle of March to begin placing bulk orders for N95 respirators (masks), ventilators, and other necessary personal protective equipment that medical workers have been struggling to obtain.

Despite daily White House briefings and promises of help on the way, the majority of hospitals across the country are facing a severe shortage of the essential equipment to protect healthcare workers against the extremely contagious and deadly virus. Many ventilators from the National Strategic Stockpile are broken and unusable, while face masks are decades old and dry-rotted.

According to the National Nurses Union (NNU), only 19 percent of nurses nationwide have enough PPE to protect staff and patients from COVID-19. Only 52 percent have access to N95 respirators nationwide.

"Our bodies are on the line," said a sign carried by a protesting New York City nurse demanding their

hospitals provide them with protective gear to keep them safe while caring for their patients. Nurses in California, Florida, Kansas, Missouri, Nevada, and Texas have begun protesting their hospitals' lack of preparedness, calling on HCA Healthcare to provide them with appropriate PPEs.

The National Nurses Union (NNU), which has 10,000 members, is attempting to get ahead and contain the movement of healthcare workers which is exposing the irrationality of a healthcare system based on profit and the criminal indifference of the Trump administration, as well as the union-backed Obama administration.

Nurses are growing more militant and finding their voice. In the Bronx, New York, last Thursday Montefiore Hospital nurse Victoria Lanquah said, "Management has put it in writing that we are to reuse our masks, gowns and face shields. Reusing contaminated items put me at risk. It puts you at risk. It puts everyone at the healthcare building at risk. We are demanding to invoke the Defense Production Act so that all of our factories can be spinning out PPE for us," said Lanquah.

"I feel like we're all just being sent to slaughter," said Thomas Riley, a nurse at Jacobi Medical Center in the Bronx, who has become infected with COVID-19 and transmitted it to his family. One New York nurse spoke on condition of anonymity that she was told to continue working despite having symptoms of the infection but could not get her facility to test her.

Angela Davis, an RN in the Medical Intensive Unit at the Research Medical Center, a dedicated COVID-19 unit in Kansas City, Missouri, said, "Protecting our patients is our highest priority, but it becomes much harder when we don't have the safety protections which puts us in danger of becoming infected. If we are no longer able to be at the bedside, who will be there to

care for our patients?”

On Friday, 35 nurses protested outside of UCI Medical Center in Orange County, California, charging that the medical center is preventing them from using surgical masks during their shifts and will not give them access to N95 respirators. Maria Louviaux, a spokeswoman for the California Nurses Association, told PBS SoCal/KCET, “We are not the only facility going through this. The nurses are extremely concerned. They are telling us they have masks available, but they want to conserve them.”

At UCLA Ronald Reagan Medical Center, nurses and their supporters held a protest vigil last week. Although Nashville-based HCA Healthcare made \$23 billion in profits over the last decade, nurses at the medical center have fewer N95 respirators and equipment than other hospitals. According to the NNU, only seven percent of nurses at HCA Healthcare facilities have enough PPE, and 35 percent have access to N95 respirators.

An article on the medical news web site, Medscape, titled “In Memoriam: Healthcare workers who have died of COVID-19,” lists the names of 132 healthcare workers throughout the world who have lost their lives. Twenty-two were in the US, including nine physician assistants or nurses.

The number of infected healthcare workers across the US has not been uniformly tracked. *US News & World Report* sent requests for information about the number of infected healthcare workers to all 50 US states but got responses from only 10. In those states, at least 1,119 workers have contracted COVID-19. Nine states are not tracking the infection of healthcare workers at all, despite how widespread it is.

According to the article, posted last week, “In Pennsylvania, 4.4% of the health care workforce had COVID-19 as of Monday. In Oklahoma, 10.6% of confirmed coronavirus patients worked in health care; in Ohio, that share is roughly 20%. Rhode Island, roughly 70% of COVID-19 tests are going to medical personnel, and they make up a quarter of all confirmed cases in the state.”

The lack of preparedness on the part of the Trump administration and state and local officials is not due to a failure of oversight, let alone a lack of resources. On the contrary, public health, like every other social need, is subordinated to the profit interests of the corporate and financial oligarchy that rules America and the

world.

The powerful protests by healthcare workers, like the wave of wildcat strikes by Amazon, Whole Foods, Instacart and autoworkers, is the initial response of the working class to the pandemic and the reactionary policies of both corporate-controlled political parties, which have endless resources to bail out Wall Street and the giant corporations while condemning tens of thousands to preventable deaths.

To take forward this fight, healthcare workers should unite their efforts with workers in all sectors of industry who are also engaged in a life-and-death struggle against being forced to work in infected workplaces to produce corporate profit.

In every hospital and medical center, nurses and other healthcare workers should form rank-and-file committees, independent of the NNU and the other unions, to mobilize the entire working class to demand full protective gear and the equipment necessary to save as many lives as possible. Instead of bailing out the superrich, trillions must be provided for immediate, universal and free testing, the production and distribution of hundreds of thousands of ventilators and the PPE needed by frontline healthcare workers.

Nurses should place no confidence in Bernie Sanders, Joseph Biden, Governor Andrew Cuomo or the Democratic Party as a whole, which are all beholden to the capitalist profit system. Instead, the growing movement of healthcare workers and the entire working class must be guided by a politically independent and socialist program, including the nationalization of the giant healthcare, medical equipment, pharmaceutical and insurance industries, and the establishment of a system of socialized medicine.



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