

Mounting anger among US healthcare workers as watchdog warns of “severe” supply shortages

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As the Department of Health and Human Services warned Monday of “severe” shortages of vital protective equipment throughout the country, healthcare workers are demanding safe working conditions and the provision of the equipment necessary to keep them safe while treating COVID-19 patients.

Around midnight Monday morning, seven night shift nurses at Sinai-Grace Hospital in Detroit carried out a sit-in to protest working under unsafe and understaffed conditions. This action has evoked a powerful response from nurses and other healthcare workers. It is the latest in a wave of protests and strikes launched by healthcare and other workers internationally to oppose the deplorable, hazardous conditions they face amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and the complete absence of preparation and planning by the ruling elites.

After spreading throughout the country for weeks without any testing, as the Trump administration downplayed and denied the dangers involved, the virus has taken hold in every major city in the US, with the epicenter located in the New York City metropolitan area, and major hot spots growing in Detroit, Chicago, New Orleans, and Los Angeles.

This week the pandemic entered into its “surge” phase in the US, with the number of cases and deaths forecast to grow rapidly, quickly overwhelming the dilapidated healthcare infrastructure across the country. By Monday evening, there were 367,507 cases and 10,908 deaths in the US, an increase of 29,500 cases and 1,165 deaths throughout the day.

Across Europe and the US, the lack of adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) has caused thousands of healthcare workers to become infected with COVID-19. In Italy, roughly nine percent of all COVID-19 patients are healthcare workers. In the US, hundreds of healthcare workers in New York City have become infected, while in Detroit 734 employees at the Henry Ford Health System

have tested positive for COVID-19, and another 1,500 employees at Beaumont Health are currently ill, with hundreds likely infected with COVID-19.

At around 7:00 pm Sunday, the incoming night shift at Sinai-Grace—the largest of eight hospitals in the for-profit Detroit Medical Center, which has been inundated with COVID-19 cases for weeks—refused to leave their break room and begin work until management had brought in additional staff to support them. Management balked, and eventually told the nurses to leave the premises. In the days leading up to Sunday’s events, at least seven night shift nurses had quit their jobs at Sinai-Grace over the deplorable conditions.

A video recorded by one of the nurses involved in the protest, Sal, filmed as the nurses left the hospital, has been viewed over 160,000 times, shared over 7,500 times, and has received over 5,200 comments and over 4,400 reactions. A separate post of the video has been viewed over 85,000 times, shared over 1,900 times, and has received over 600 comments and over 800 reactions.

In the video, Sal stated, “Sinai-Grace is like the epicenter for this coronavirus. We’ve had three straight weeks with over 110 patients, and an average of 12-14 nurses. At night, that drops down to about eight nurses, and we’ve been accepting that and working hard. But tonight, it was the breaking point for us, because we cannot safely take care of your loved ones out here with just six, seven nurses, with multiple people on [ventilators], multiple people on drips. It’s not right.”

Another nurse stated emphatically, “Something needs to change. You have to make a stand at some point to get a change.”

Nurses on the previous day shift, who began working at 7:00 a.m. Sunday, were kept on the job after the night shift workers were told to leave, working 24 hours straight. Raina, a day shift nurse at Sinai-Grace, later posted a message of solidarity with the night shift workers, while

highlighting the horrible conditions faced at the hospital.

Raina wrote, “The dayshift ER nurses just worked 24 hours straight with no lunch break [...] night shift was right to refuse to come out because help NEVER came!!!! Now I’m home. Shaking inside at the fact I was just trapped in a COVID-filled area wearing the same PPE for 24 hours!!!! [...] My immune system is low because my body is running on empty. Myself at risk for catching this deadly virus now more than ever.”

Her comment continued, “I’m so angry. I can’t believe during a pandemic with a deadly virus killing so many people I have been forced to endure this. We support our night shift fully. [...] They asked for help. They were told no help was coming and to leave or accept the assignment. It makes me so sad to know that so many years of combined experience walked out that door on night shift. It wasn’t a group of new nurses. It WAS THE CORE OF NIGHTSHIFT!!!! [...] Why wasn’t everyone with RN next to their name working!!!! We are gonna have the worst PTSD from this. [...] Detroit, Michigan needs help.”

Raina’s comments have gone viral, having been shared over 900 times by nurses and workers internationally. The flood of comments posted on Sal’s video are overwhelmingly supportive of the nurses, with many condemning management for not donning medical gear and helping staff the hospital themselves, given that most are qualified to provide care as well.

Victorria, a nurse from Texas, wrote, “25 patients! There is absolutely NO way 1 nurse can take care of 25 patients. That is insane! All of the nurse managers, assistant nurse managers, directors, educators, supervisors, case managers, anyone with an RN license in that hospital should be in scrubs with a patient assignment BEFORE any nurse is given a double-digit patient assignment!”

Leilani wrote, “Sorry to see it come down to this but any nurse who works ICU knew it was coming! I support you in Wisconsin.”

The conditions nurses face in Detroit mirror those faced across the country and internationally.

Later on Monday, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Inspector General released a report detailing the utter lack of preparation of hospitals across the US for the anticipated surge in cases.

Based on a survey conducted with hospital administrators from 323 hospitals across 46 states from March 23-27, “Hospitals reported that severe shortages of testing supplies and extended waits for test results limited hospitals’ ability to monitor the health of patients and staff,” with wait times for test results lasting “seven days or longer.”

Further, “Hospitals reported that widespread shortages of PPE put staff and patients at risk, [...] and that the lack of a

robust supply chain was delaying or preventing them from restocking PPE needed to protect staff. Hospitals also expressed uncertainty about availability of PPE from Federal and State sources and noted sharp increases in prices for PPE from some vendors.”

Unsurprisingly, the survey found that hospitals “were not always able to maintain adequate staffing levels or offer staff adequate support” and “anticipated being overwhelmed if they experienced a surge of patients, who may require special beds and rooms to treat and contain infection.” A major concern is the anticipated “shortages of ventilators,” which “would pose difficult decisions about ethical allocation and liability.”

Asked about this damning indictment of his administration’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic at Monday’s White House press conference, Trump lashed out at reporters, repeatedly saying, “it’s just wrong,” and asked for the name of the inspector general. He claimed that the report was a politically-motivated attack, even though it was authored by a nonpartisan office, and sought to deflect blame for the crisis created by his administration, saying, “States can be doing their own testing. Hospitals are supposed to be doing testing. We’re the federal government, we’re not supposed to be standing on street corners doing testing.”

Healthcare workers’ determination to fight for their own safety and the well-being of their patients is a sharp expression of the growing radicalization taking place within the working class. The unprecedented catastrophe of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the complete inability of capitalism to provide for the needs of society, and to secure the most basic right to life itself.

As the virus wreaks ever-greater havoc, growing numbers of workers recognize the need for a vast expansion of the ranks of nurses and support staff, and the mobilization of the economy to produce the necessary PPE, ventilators, test kits and other equipment required to fight the pandemic. Only through the nationalization of the healthcare industry and workers’ control over the major industries, to retool them to produce essential medical supplies, can the working class fight to prevent the mass deaths and social catastrophe threatened by the pandemic.



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