

US health care workers protest government back-to-work demands

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As small groups organize protests against social distancing measures implemented to slow the spread of COVID-19, health care workers have responded with protests of their own against the right-wing demonstrations and the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) in hospitals.

On April 19, hundreds of protesters assembled in front of Colorado's state capitol calling for the state and country to lift stay-at-home orders. Nurses in the area staged a counter-protest and demanded the demonstrators go home. Images of Colorado health care workers defiantly standing in the street to block protesters' cars have gone viral and garnered the support of people across the country, who are sympathetic to and admire the selflessness and sacrifice of health care workers.

Colorado-based photographer Alyson McClaran, who captured the moments, described the scene as being pregnant with anger as protesters yelled at the nurses. One protester with a sign that read "Land of the Free" told one of the nurses to "go back to China."

McClaran told *Time* magazine, "[m]y gut was telling me this is history, and I wanted to document what is happening in my city right now and show what was going on. I had tears in my eyes half the day because I was in shock at how many people were out, and how much anger there was, so I had to protect myself by leaving. I didn't feel safe health-wise, and that's when I stumbled upon the nurses."

"I understand people are stressed," she said, "and they want to get back to work, but it just showed how much anger there was. Unlike other protests I'd covered, like gun violence, Black Lives Matter, this is a global issue. Everywhere is experiencing this right now at the same time, that's why it felt different."

Health care workers in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania also

opposed a demonstration organized on April 20 after the governor extended the state's shelter in place order until May 8. A group of nurses stood about a block away from the main protest, holding signs telling those who opposed the stay-at-home to return home.

A nurse who was among the counter protesters, held a sign that read: "I Don't Want You in My ICU ... Stay Home!"

"We don't think we have enough equipment in all the hospitals in Pennsylvania to take care of all the patients that are going to be coming in based on us getting a surge," Katrina Rectenwald, a nurse at the protest, told CNN.

The opposition to social distancing measures has been organized and facilitated by ultra-right reactionary forces. Many protesting across the country wore pro-Trump garments and, in some cases, carried assault rifles and displayed Confederate flags or Nazi insignia. The largest of these protests, organized in Lansing, Michigan, was sponsored by the Michigan Conservative Coalition, an ultra-right group of Trump loyalists.

In addition, fascistic organizations such as the Michigan Proud Boys, the Michigan Liberty Militia, and other far-right forces were involved. Donald Trump defended anti-quarantine protesters as "great people." "These people love our country, they want to get back to work," the president said in a tweet.

The protests coincide with the drive to "reopen" the country, heavily promoted by both major parties and the media. States including Texas, Florida, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Georgia have utilized the protests to either open sections of their economies or announce "frameworks" for reopening.

Georgia Governor Brian Kemp has gotten backlash for his decision to allow businesses such as gyms,

bowling alleys, hair and nail salons and massage therapists to open as early as Friday. The state has not even met the inefficient and fraudulent guidelines put in place by the Trump administration, placing countless lives in danger.

The National Nurses United (NNU) organized a protest outside the White House on Tuesday demanding the Trump administration take action to protect health care workers. The nurses read aloud the names of 50 nurses who have died while battling the coronavirus. The NNU demanded the administration utilize the Defense Production Act (DPA) to order the mass production of PPE, ventilators and coronavirus test kits.

“NNU is calling on Congress to mandate the DPA’s use to produce the equipment and supplies health care workers need to care for COVID-19 patients as well as to conduct mass testing that is required to control the spread of the virus,” the union said in a statement Tuesday.

One nurse told NBC News, “We are here because our colleagues are dying. I think that right now people think of us as heroes, but we’re feeling like martyrs.”

Last week, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported that at least 9,200 health care workers were infected with the coronavirus but admitted there was no comprehensive way to tally those who lost their lives trying to save others. The organization stressed that the count was drawn from just 16 percent of the nation’s COVID-19 cases, meaning the real number of health care workers infected is significantly higher. Using data from states, the CDC estimated that health care workers account for approximately 11 percent of all infections.

Some states, including Ohio, have reported rates of health care worker infections as high as 20 percent but have not revealed data for individual counties, cities or hospitals. The Henry Ford health center in Detroit reported that more than 700 employees tested positive for COVID-19 but declined to state the number of deaths.

Nurses countrywide are insisting they be provided with proper protective gear. Demonstrations have taken place in Michigan, Washington D.C, New York, Arizona, Los Angeles, Kentucky, New Jersey, and elsewhere. Nurses in Phoenix counter-protested a Patriot’s rally on Monday. Other nurses across the country reported being reprimanded for speaking out against the lack of proper protective gear. Many have

said they feel persecuted for simply trying to protect themselves and others.

Unions have organized a number of the protests and have tried to channel the anger felt into the Democratic Party or slogans such as “PPEs over profits.” The unions, in typical fashion, have not challenged the capitalist profit system but merely offer health care workers an avenue to blow off steam. The lack of PPE and the destructive campaign to prematurely reopen the economy stem directly from the prerogatives of the capitalist system.

Health care workers are placing their lives and those of their families in danger to save others under extremely difficult conditions. A huge mental and physical toll is placed on them. However, capitalism demands their well-being be subordinated to the extraction of profit from the working population.

People across the US have expressed deep sympathy and admiration for those on the frontlines of the coronavirus pandemic. However, with each passing day the conflict between the interests of a tiny parasitic layer and most of the world’s population becomes clearer. A global fight for socialism is necessary to ensure the safety of health care workers and the population.



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