

Nursing union NYSNA provides cover for Cuomo's push to reopen the economy

Ali Elhassan
29 May 2020

The New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) recently issued proposed guidelines for the reopening of the economy by the administration of Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo following a stay at home order which shut down non-essential businesses as part of the effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus. With a membership of over 42,000 nurses NYSNA is the largest nursing union in the state and the US.

Although the rates of newly confirmed COVID-19 infections and deaths in New York have been reduced to their lowest levels in 30 days through quarantine and social distancing measures, the state is still fully in the grip of the pandemic and continues to see over 100 deaths and over 1,000 infections on a daily basis. To date, the pandemic has claimed the lives of over 29,000 New Yorkers, a death toll higher than France or Spain. Reopening the economy under conditions where the numbers of cases are still high in New York, and increasing across many parts of the country, is preparing the grounds for mass death on a scale that may well outstrip what was seen in the spring.

While reopening at this point has been widely opposed by scientists and the general public, NYSNA has accepted the governor's policy with its five-page report titled "How To Move New York Forward—What Frontline Nurses Need Before New York Reopens."

Well aware of the seething anger among workers and health care workers, in particular, the union advances a series of vague demands such as increased health care funding and adequate personal protective equipment (PPE). Conspicuously absent from the report are critical demands such as the need to provide every nurse with an adequate supply of N95 masks and the need for a comprehensive testing, tracing and quarantine program, which is the only public health policy that can contain the pandemic.

With its guidelines, NYSNA is seeking to provide the reopening of the economy under Cuomo with a left fig-leaf, promoting the illusion that the political establishment responsible for jeopardizing the health of the population and frontline healthcare workers can be pressured into adopting socially responsible policies.

In reality, Cuomo, along with New York City mayor Bill de Blasio and the rest of New York's ruling establishment are responsible for allowing the state to become the epicenter of the

pandemic. Up until March 22, Cuomo intransigently opposed instituting any kind of quarantine measures, trivializing the disease and insisting that "the fear, the panic is a bigger problem than the virus." He only reversed course after thousands of positive cases were confirmed in the state, all but ensuring the catastrophic propagation of the virus. Now, Cuomo, who has received millions in campaign donations from nursing home companies, is ensuring that no nursing home corporate executives will be held accountable for the staggering death toll in their facilities.

Even as the crisis was raging, the Democratic state and city administrations pushed through far-reaching cuts to education and health care. Cuomo has even gone so far as to waive \$6.7 billion in emergency federal COVID-19 funding that is predicated on states not making cuts to Medicaid in their 2020 budget. Layoffs and furloughs of medical workers are already underway and further hospital closures are being prepared in an effort to guarantee profits at the expense of workers' lives. The last two decades have seen 28 hospitals close across the state. The austerity measures pursued by Democrats and Republicans alike have directly contributed to the tens of thousands of lives already lost.

In the first months of the pandemic, nurses and other health care workers on the frontlines were confronted with a situation where chronically understaffed and undersupplied hospitals forced them to work in unacceptably dangerous conditions. The abandonment of well-established safety standards, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's relaxation of its one N95 mask per patient guideline, resulted in the avoidable death of at least 78 hospital workers in New York state alone, among them 32 NYSNA members.

The union bears direct responsibility for these deaths. Throughout the past months, it has blocked any struggle by nurses and other health care workers for more PPE.

In a particularly stark revelation of the union's hostility to nurses, NYSNA director Terry Alaimo attacked a Mount Sinai nurse in a vulgar outburst because she had exposed the inadequate supply of gowns and other PPE by sharing a photo of nurses wearing garbage bags. The photo quickly went viral as a shocking exposure of the horrific conditions prevailing in the hospitals in New York City, the center of world finance

capital. In an email that was leaked to the *New York Post*, Alaimo wrote “Diane is full of shit and has no F–king [idea] what is really going on ... Tell Diane to shut the f–k up and if she has an issue to call me. She is not helping and I am sure she is not working. She is a useless piece of sh-t.”

One nurse at Elmhurst Hospital told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she and her colleagues had “all written to the union for help. ... I don’t think they’re [union] doing anything about it. They [only] take dues out of your paycheck.” Even as the pandemic was going to its fifth month, she said, the union was still not doing anything to address the shortage of PPE.

The few demonstrations organized by the union and a series of lawsuits against the state and two hospitals over lack of PPE have had the purpose not of improving the situation, but of diverting anger and demoralizing nurses. A lawsuit filed by NYSNA against Montefiore Medical Center, located in the Bronx, was dismissed on May 1. NYSNA immediately accepted the dismissal of the lawsuit and stated that the fact that Montefiore was now providing one N95 per day—which falls far short of the required one N95 per patient—was enough of a “success.”

This record leaves no doubt that whatever vague demands it puts forward for public consumption, NYSNA will not only not fight for more PPE, but, in fact, is actively blocking workers from fighting for their interests and safe working conditions.

Health care workers must not accept that thousands more will die for the profits of Wall Street. In order to save the lives of workers, and ensuring their income, the following demands must be advanced:

- Worker control over staffing levels and scheduling to allow for proper treatment for patients and sufficient rest and recuperation for workers.
- Guarantee the highest quality PPE in sufficient quantities to allow their use in accordance with health and safety standards.
- Immediately call back all laid off and furloughed health care workers.
- Full and timely disclosure of information about the spread of the virus in the workforce.
- Regular testing for all workers at no cost and full pay for those who must quarantine after testing positive.
- Universal health care, free for all, and equality of care.

These demands can only be implemented through the establishment of rank-and-file workplace safety committees by

health care workers in every hospital and workplace. They must be based on the principles of the social and medical needs of workers, and not those of private profit, so that they can guarantee that policies be implemented in strict accordance with scientifically recommended guidelines.

These committees must be completely independent of the unions. Nurses have paid a bitter price for the betrayals of the union, including with the deaths of their colleagues. The necessary political conclusions must be drawn.

The fight for safe working conditions and a scientifically based response to the pandemic that is carried out in the interests of the working class, and not those of Wall Street, requires a political break from the Democratic Party and a turn to a socialist and internationalist program.

NYSNA’s role in the pandemic flows directly from its long-standing policy of subordinating workers to the Democratic Party. The union regularly organizes meetings with Democratic senators and presidential candidates such as Elizabeth Warren or Bernie Sanders. It has repeatedly endorsed Andrew Cuomo in his election campaigns, touting his supposedly “progressive” credentials and presenting the politician of Wall Street as a “friend of labor.”

In its role as an extended arm of hospital management and the Democratic Party, NYSNA is mirroring the trajectory of the unions across the US and the world, which been transformed into organizations working directly on behalf of corporate management and the state.

Health care workers in New York are confronted with the same criminal policies as their colleagues across the country and, indeed, around the world. From Brazil to Germany, Ukraine, Russia and China, the lives of working people, including those of health care workers, are treated as expendable. It is among the working class across the US and internationally that health care workers will find their true allies.

We encourage nurses who are interested in setting up such committees and discussing these questions to contact us today.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact