

HPAE union betrays New Jersey nurses' fight for PPE and better pay

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During the past several weeks, thousands of nurses in southern New Jersey have staged pickets to demand better pay, safe working conditions, and adequate staffing at their hospitals. The novel coronavirus pandemic has only made the satisfaction of these longstanding demands more urgent

During the spring, New Jersey, along with New York and Connecticut, was the center of the COVID-19 outbreak in the US. As of July 1, New Jersey had 171,928 cases of the novel coronavirus and 15,078 deaths. The state has the second-most deaths and third-most cases in the country. By June 13, the state had already lost more residents to the pandemic than it lost during World War II.

Like their counterparts across the US, health care workers in New Jersey have faced renewed attacks such as reduced hours, furloughs, and staff cuts since the pandemic reached the United States in March. At the same time, more than half of the state's health care workers have been exposed to the novel coronavirus, according to a survey. Of those who became infected, 25 percent of health care workers returned to work before they felt they had recovered. Nearly 75 percent of health care workers were told to reuse their N95 masks for days. Trauma and feelings of failure and abandonment are widespread among the state's nurses. Several dozen New Jersey health care workers have died from COVID-19, deaths that could have been prevented through better personal protective equipment (PPE).

Democratic Governor Phil Murphy nevertheless is pressing ahead with his premature reopening of the state, which will lead to even more infections and deaths.

Even when the pandemic was at its initial peak, New Jersey cut hospital staff. Now, as the increase in new cases has slowed, nurses at three facilities in New Jersey are beginning to enter struggles over better PPE and higher wages. Anger is running high among health care

workers, and strikes and protests are spreading in the US and internationally, but the Health Professionals and Allied Employees (HPAE) union, which is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), has systematically stifled and isolated these struggles.

Until this week, about 300 nurses at Southern Ocean Medical Center in Stafford Township and about 1,200 nurses at Jersey Shore University Medical Center in Neptune were staging informational pickets seeking better wages, adequate supplies of PPE, and restrictions on duties unrelated to nursing that could entail increased risk of exposure to the virus. The contract for nurses at both hospitals expired on May 31 and was extended. Both facilities are owned by Hackensack Meridian Health, the largest health care provider in New Jersey.

During contract negotiations, the company proposed to use so-called floating nurses who could work in several departments, potentially including departments for which they had not been trained. Nurses opposed this idea.

Throughout the negotiations, HPAE deliberately limited nurses' actions to symbolic informational pickets that each lasted for only four or five hours. In a statement meant to reassure the company, the union publicly emphasized that the nurses were not on strike. The union has consistently tried to separate their members at different facilities.

When negotiations at Jersey Shore University recently broke off, HPAE continued negotiations and reached an agreement at Southern Ocean. On July 2, it was reported that HPAE and the company also reached an agreement for the Jersey Shore University facility.

The three-year contract at Southern Ocean, which was ratified last week, will provide for a limited increase in pay. However, the contract also states that HPAE and management will develop guidelines for floating nurses, which the nurses had opposed. Moreover, reports suggest that the contract does not guarantee adequate PPE or

prevent nurses from being assigned non-nursing duties that could expose them to infection. This agreement arises as the coronavirus spreads rapidly throughout the country and the Murphy administration prematurely reopens New Jersey. With 300 new cases each day on average, the disease has not been contained in the state and conditions are ripe for a second surge.

HPAE is playing the same role at Salem Medical Center in Middletown Township, where about 140 nurses also are negotiating a contract. Like their brothers and sisters at Jersey Shore, they are demanding higher wages. They call for better nurse-to-patient ratios and demand that Community Healthcare Associates (CHA), which owns the facility, honor commitments it previously made regarding accrued paid sick and vacation time. In addition, nurses must fight CHA continuously for PPE.

CHA bought Salem from its previous owner in 2016. Before the sale closed, nurses began negotiating a contract with CHA, and it was finalized within months. Nurses say that CHA agreed to honor the previous owner's system for accrued paid time off, and that nurses would keep the time that they had accrued. But when CHA officially took over Salem, the company claimed that it had agreed to a new sick-and-vacation-time program, not the previous one.

CHA also is denying nurses pay that is commensurate with their experience. An intensive care nurse at Salem estimated that 80 percent of senior nursing staff at the hospital had left because of this policy, which has made it difficult to recruit and maintain senior nurses. Salaries at Salem are even lower than at other hospitals in the area.

HPAE has allowed negotiations with CHA to drag on fruitlessly since December, and the nurses' contract expired in February. Despite the absence of a contract, and despite management's attacks on Salem's nurses, the union has only organized rare informational pickets in front of the hospital. It has not called for a strike or a united struggle of nurses at Salem and at Jersey Shore. Its tactic is to wear nurses down until they are ready to accept concessions.

The role of HPAE mirrors that of other unions in the US and internationally. The New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) has consistently blocked nurses' struggle for PPE. When a nurse at Mount Sinai shared a photo of nurses wearing garbage bags because the supply of gowns was insufficient, NYSNA Director Terry Alaimo excoriated the nurse in a vulgar e-mail that was leaked to the *New York Post*. NYSNA also provided support for Governor Andrew Cuomo's plan for the

premature reopening of the state by issuing a five-page report full of vague demands that it did not intend to enforce. Like NYSNA and the AFT, HPAE is firmly integrated into the Democratic Party.

To develop a successful struggle against furloughs and layoffs, and for decent wages and adequate protection at their workplaces, nurses should follow the example of autoworkers in Detroit, who have formed independent rank-and-file committees to protect their health and safety. Nurses should advance the following demands:

- Worker control over staffing levels and scheduling to allow for proper treatment for patients and sufficient rest and recuperation for workers.
- The highest quality PPE in sufficient quantities to allow their use in accordance with health and safety standards.
- Immediate recall of 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.
- Free and universal health care of equal quality.

Their allies in this struggle will be health care workers and other sections of the working class across the US, Latin America and internationally. We encourage nurses and other health care workers in New Jersey who want to discuss and take up this fight to contact the WSWS.



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