Union suppresses Albany, New York nurses' fight for coronavirus protections

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As the number of new coronavirus infections increases in New York state, 2,200 nurses at the Albany Medical Center are fighting for basic protections against the virus. The hospital's administration is trying to wear down the nurses, who have been working without a contract for two years. Far from conducting a serious fight, however, the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) has isolated the struggle by nurses in the state capital and opposed any mobilization of health care workers and broader sections of the working class to secure their needs.

As of October 30, New York had 503,176 confirmed coronavirus cases and had recorded 33,444 deaths. The Capital Region had 10,486 cases and 384 deaths. The rate of positive coronavirus tests is increasing throughout the state. A second wave of the pandemic is on the horizon, and it may prove to be more lethal than the first. Protective equipment and procedures are urgently needed to prevent further infections and deaths among nurses and other health care workers.

At a rally on October 18, the nurses announced five demands that are based on medical necessity. They called for universal testing of patients for COVID-19, the housing of all patients with COVID-19 in separate units, the improvement of air filtration systems, the raising of standards for personal protective equipment (PPE) and improved staffing ratios.

"The health and safety of our patients, students and staff remain Albany Med's top priorities," Matt Markham, vice president of communications for Albany Medical Center, claimed in a statement. But the administration's true attitude toward its staff is revealed in its refusal to provide nurses with information about how much PPE is available and its requirement that nurses reuse their PPE.

At the rally, nurses displayed a photo of a discolored, yellowish N95 mask after it supposedly had been decontaminated. They demanded a new mask for each patient encounter, as is recommended to prevent the spread of the virus. "When nurses and other staff come to work to care for their patients, it should not be a game of hide the medical masks. I want to stress that disposal means disposal, and single use means single use," said Dr. Brenda Robinson in support of the nurses.

Albany Medical Center's disregard for nurses' safety has compromised their health. When the pandemic was at its peak in New York state in March, 45 health care workers at the hospital were confirmed to have tested positive for COVID-19. In fact, the hospital had fewer COVID-19 positive patients (36) than COVID-19 positive staff members.

The administration puts not only nurses, but patients at risk. Emergency department patients often are lined up in hallways, instead of being administered coronavirus testing and placed in negative-pressure rooms, according to nurses.

The nurses at Albany Medical Center voted to join NYSNA in 2018. Since that time, however, the hospital has refused to agree to a contract. NYSNA has organized a few impotent protests to allow nurses to let off steam while preventing any meaningful action. On September 7, Labor Day, which was nearly two months ago, hundreds of nurses held a rally at the hospital and threatened to strike within 10 days if the administration did not agree to a contract. The hospital refused and NYSNA so far has not called a strike.

Furthermore, NYSNA has offered no resistance to the hospital's attacks on nurses' wages and working conditions. While publicly hailing its nurses as "heroes," the administration cut their hours and illegally reduced their personal time, an intensive care

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nurse told the *Daily Gazette*, a newspaper based in nearby Schenectady. The hospital also canceled nurses' annual wage increase. In response, the union has kept Albany Medical Center nurses isolated from those at Ellis Hospital in Schenectady (also NYSNA members), who have reached a contract with management.

During the spring, New York state became an epicenter of the pandemic. Epidemiologists had warned of the likelihood of a dangerous pandemic for years, but when the novel coronavirus arrived, the state's hospitals were understaffed and ill equipped. On April 7 alone, a record 779 people died of COVID-19, and the total number of confirmed cases reached 149,316. By May 29, at least 78 hospital workers, including 32 members of NYSNA, had died. Instead of fighting to protect nurses, NYSNA area director Terry Alaimo verbally abused a nurse at Mt. Sinai West in New York City who famously shared the photo of coworkers wearing garbage bags because PPE was not available. NYSNA also accepted Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo's policy of reopening the state prematurely. It issued proposed guidelines for an allegedly "safe" reopening that did not call for essential measures such as comprehensive testing and contact tracing.

Like nurses, teachers, autoworkers and other workers have been forced back to work without adequate protections against the pandemic. Instead of supporting them, their unions have colluded with management to suppress opposition and enforce management's dictates. Responding to the treachery of their unions, teachers and autoworkers across the country have formed rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, to fight for the protections, working conditions and wages they need. These rank-and-file committees are also independent of both the Democratic and Republican parties, which merely represent different factions of Wall Street and the corporations.

Nurses at the Albany Medical Center should build rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. Nurses must reach out to their colleagues at different hospitals and in other states for united action. They must appeal to teachers and workers in other industries for support in their struggle. We encourage nurses and other health care workers throughout New York who want to discuss and take up this fight to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and the WSWS *Health Care Workers Newsletter*.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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