

COVID-19 cases spike across US as health care workers struggle with understaffing in hospitals

Alex Johnson
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With infections and deaths from COVID-19 reaching extraordinary levels in the United States, opposition among nurses and health care workers is brewing against the unmitigated spread of the disease and unpreparedness of hospitals for the deluge of sick patients.

The US is experiencing a sharp increase in coronavirus cases, which is coinciding with dangerous upticks in hospitalizations. Daily confirmed cases have hovered near or above 100,000 over the past several days, reaching record-shattering numbers, surpassing the number of infections in April, when the virus was at its peak. The total death toll now stands at nearly 240,000 as of this writing.

Nowhere are these conditions being expressed more catastrophically than in hospitals, which are witnessing a flood of COVID-19 patients that risk bringing the nation's health care system to the breaking point. An estimated one-quarter of US counties have reported a peak of new cases in the past month, including most cases in states where officials were most eager to prematurely reopen their economies.

These include Ohio, Indiana, North and South Dakota, Wyoming and Wisconsin. Capacity levels are also becoming more acute, as 80 percent of hospital beds in cities such as Atlanta, Minneapolis and Baltimore near full occupancy.

Shortages of health care workers are reaching disastrous levels. In Montana, which is seeing a dramatic rise in infections, staffing shortages caused by the pandemic have shut down a clinic in the state's capital. Employees at one Northwestern regional hospital who have been exposed to COVID-19 have been told to continue working despite the danger.

In St. Vincent Hospital in Billings, one of the largest cities in Montana, three COVID-19 units were expanded last week, after the state reported its second-highest daily cases on record. Michael Skehan, St. Vincent's chief operating officer, called the situation facing the hospital a "crisis." One healthcare worker from the hospital told NBC News, "I never thought we would be anywhere close to where we are now. I'm a good nurse—and the nurses I work with are good nurses—but we are broken."

In North Dakota, a state where cases are growing at a rate faster than any other, hospitals are being compelled to forgo elective surgeries again because of the surge. Many hospitals are debating plans to potentially request government assistance to hire more nurses, in the face of the abysmal staffing levels.

Despite the imminent crisis facing hospitals, nurses and health care workers are being forced to contend with the virus with little to no changes in hospital conditions or adequate protection. The anger of health care workers has been expressed in several recent demonstrations demanding safe conditions.

In San Luis Obispo, California, workers at 11 Tenet-owned Hospital conglomerates voted overwhelmingly for strike action in opposition to unsafe conditions and hospital neglect. The 4,300-workforce across the region voted by 96 percent in favor of the strike.

Tenet is a multinational and investor-owned health care corporation with 65 hospitals and more than 500 health care facilities. The company has boasted more than \$1 billion in profits in 2020 so far and received more than \$250 million in CARES Act-related bailout money from the California state government. The company denounced the strike vote in an official

statement and is threatening to hire strikebreakers. “Our hospitals will remain fully operational and patient care will continue uninterrupted,” the company said.

In Connecticut, more than 400 nurses held a two-day strike in mid-October over low wages and severe shortages of personal protective equipment. Dozens of nurses picketed outside William W. Backus Hospital in Norwich to charge the hospital with “unfair labor practice,” with many nurses chanting “PPE over profits.” The Backus Federation of Nurses, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) union, called the limited strike to allow workers to blow off steam, while behind the scenes it negotiated a sell-out contract that failed to address nurses’ demands.

In Redding, California, health care workers at Shasta Regional Medical Center (SRMC) staged a picket protest outside the hospital for two hours on October 28, demanding a change in the hospital’s patient staffing levels, which have remained intolerably low for months.

According to the California Nurses Association (CNA), health care workers sent Casey Fatch, CEO of the SRMC, a petition a month ago outlining more than 200 staff concerns relating to patient safety protocols and staffing policies. Hospital management, however, has responded to nurses’ demands with a callous dismissal, with Fatch telling a local newspaper, “staffing levels are appropriate and adequate for our census and patient level of care needs.”

The unions have rejected any struggle to unite nurses and other health care workers across the state in a common struggle against the health care monopolies and unsafe staffing levels that threaten both frontline workers and patients. Instead, the AFT, the United Nurses Association of California/Union of Health Care Professionals (UNAC/UHCP) and other unions announced on October 29 that they had sued Labor Secretary Eugene Scalia and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for failing to protect health care workers during the pandemic.

There is no doubt that the Trump administration and OSHA are criminally responsible for conditions that have led to the infection of more than 192,000 health care workers and at least 771 deaths, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But equally guilty are the Democrats, including California Governor Gavin Newsom and New York Governor

Andrew Cuomo. It was Cuomo who inserted liability protections for nursing home chains into the state budget. A Biden administration will be just as committed to the profit interests of the health care giants as Trump and the Republicans.

The *Washington Post* reported that the lawsuit was the outcome of frustration on the part of “labor advocates and Democrats” over OSHA’s criminal refusal to enforce safety guidelines in hospitals and other workplaces. During the summer, a judge dismissed a similar lawsuit filed by the AFL-CIO while the pandemic was raging across industries after lockdown measures were lifted.

The OSHA filing is a publicity stunt on the part of the unions, which have done nothing to protect health care workers. That is why nurses, physicians, and other health care workers must form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, to unite their struggles and enforce health and safety. This must be combined with the development of a powerful political movement of the working class against both corporate-controlled parties, to fight for socialism, including the replacement of for-profit medicine with a socialized system guaranteeing free, high quality care for all.



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