

“Our patients are dying like flies, it’s like a warzone”

Nurses call for help as California hospitals pushed to the brink

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California hospitals continue to buckle under the strain of a flood of COVID-19 patients in critical care requiring hospitalization. The state remains the epicenter of the pandemic in the United States. Only last week it the milestone of 2 million cases, is quickly approaching 2.25 million cases. Deaths have surpassed 25,000 in the richest and most populous state in the country. Every day deaths continue to break one-day records, with 440 deaths on Tuesday, more than half of which are from Los Angeles County.

On Wednesday evening California Governor Gavin Newsom confirmed that the UK variant of the virus has been found in a 30-year-old man with no history of travel in the state’s southern San Diego county, implying wide community spread.

According to Health and Human Services Secretary Dr. Mark Ghaly, the state’s hospitals have begun diverting ambulances and making decisions about rationing care. On Tuesday, he reported that more than 95% of Los Angeles hospitals have diverted ambulances in the last 24 hours. Throughout the regions of Southern California and the agricultural San Joaquin Valley, ICU capacity remains at zero percent.

Meanwhile healthcare staff are pleading for help. A video by Gayana Chuklansev, an intensive care nurse in Los Angeles, went viral on Tiktok and has been viewed 1.5 million times as of Wednesday. Chuklansev explains through tears, “We have no ventilators for patients. We have no sedating medications. Patients are dying like flies... We’re full. We’re at max capacity. We have no resources. We have no staff. Our doctors can’t even intubate because they have like 40 patients each.”

“Physically I am exhausted,” an Anaheim nurse told

the *World Socialist Web Site*.” Last Monday we had a Code Blue and two intubations. I have six ICU patients in my unit because our ICU is full. Some days, I’m so busy I’m completely numb to hunger, thirst, bathroom. I don’t realize until the end, 14-16 hours later, that I haven’t stopped to take care of any of that. I don’t feel anything.

“Emotionally, it’s so taxing. We lost a 43-year-old two weeks ago with five kids and a pregnant wife. Then we found out that the wife had miscarried and also contracted COVID-19. We intubated her, while her husband of 20+ years sat in the bed next to her crying. I held his hand and promised we’d do everything we could to help her. My last memory of him was me rolling her past him to ICU. She died a couple days later.

“Every single day, I’m calling family to tell them their loved one has died or just got intubated. Saturday I had a Code Blue and intubation at the same time. ICU was too busy to show up so we were completely on our own. We came out of those, and an hour or two later, I had two more patients crashing.

“We have also lost people at our hospital, one of our housekeepers just last Wednesday. He was the happiest guy. He’d sing and dance randomly. One of the last things he said before we intubated him was, ‘I really don’t want to die. I’m not ready.’ It just breaks my heart.

“We all feel like we’re failing our patients, doctors included. We’re doing everything we can, but it’s not enough. We’re overloaded and feel our care is suffering. It’s a struggle to accept that we just can’t do everything. We hate to lose patients, for families to lose them.”

Sandra, a Riverside California nurse whose name has been changed to protect her identity, works at Riverside Community Health owned by healthcare giant Hospital Corporation of America. “I am code blue nurse, I go to all the emergencies. I only see the sickest of the sick. I can’t get to them all, there are just so many.

“In Riverside county, our ICU is at zero capacity. We are converting our cafeteria, we are all taking on more than we safely can. There will be another surge on top of what we are experiencing right now. There are so many nurses leaving because their mental well-being cannot handle it. We went into this profession because we want to help people, not watch them die.

“We have a refrigerator truck outside my hospital. On my worst day, I had six patients die. I have been a nurse for 8 years. I am a code blue nurse, a critical care nurse and I’ve seen more death than all my previous years combined. All our patents on high flow, so our oxygen is not performing and it’s the worst possible time.”

As of Sunday at least five hospitals in Los Angeles County were forced to declare an “internal disaster.” Dr. Christina Ghaly, the County’s Health Services director, stated the aging infrastructure that pumps oxygen to patient rooms is unable to handle the flow, resulting in hospitals turning away patients. “Because of that high flow through the pipes, sometimes it’s freezing in the pipes, and obviously if it freezes, then you can’t have good flow of oxygen,” Ghaly said.

However, the state Democratic Party is intent on keeping businesses and schools open. Yesterday California Governor Gavin Newsom announced a \$2 billion dollar plan to open schools by mid-February, essentially using funding shortfalls to pry open the schools by offering up to \$450 to \$750 per student if they commit to reopening. Even while forcing schools to reopen, Newsom has ordered over 60 refrigeration trucks to line up outside area hospitals to hold the bodies of the dead, as well as tens of thousands of body bags.

“Can you imagine exposing yourself to 30 families at one time?” Sandra said. “Articles and studies have shown that children have shown a higher viral load. Our ICU is at zero capacity. Meanwhile I am in the hospital and a mother of three kids was crying to me worried about her children. She ended up dying on Christmas Eve. It’s unconscionable they are even considering opening the schools.”

The conditions in hospitals are producing deep opposition among healthcare workers, which the unions are doing everything to divert and suppress. Just before Christmas, nurses at three Southern California hospitals in Riverside and Los Angeles Counties voted by 92% in favor strike action, which was set to begin on December 24th.

However, the SEIU announced over the weekend it had reached a “historic” deal and that the strike was averted at HCA hospitals, celebrating along with state and county officials. They are pushing through a contract this week without allowing nurses the time to study it in an attempt to cut off actions that could quickly spread past the health care industry.

To break out of the straitjacket of the SEIU, the Socialist Equality Party is campaigning to build rank-and-file safety committees to prepare for a political general strike, to demand immediate closures of schools and non-essential businesses, with wages guaranteed through supplemental unemployment, and the commitment of massive resources to public health, including a rapid rollout of the vaccine. This requires the independent mobilization of the working class, in opposition to both the capitalist parties and corporate agents in the trade unions.

“We need to join with teachers to call a general strike, hold government officials accountable, and demand relief in our hospitals,” Sandra said. “There are four million nurses. Imagine the force we would have if we joined with teachers. We are the workers that run the world.”



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