

# Health care workers on the move throughout the world in a fight for patient safety and a living wage

Alfred Kurosawa, Norisa Diaz  
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As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage across the globe, governments everywhere are abandoning all mitigation efforts. A fierce opposition is brewing among workers all over the globe, particularly among health care workers who are standing up in defense of patients and society at large.

The Biden administration, along with its counterparts in Western Europe are continuing their campaign to reopen society, no matter the human cost. This campaign has been accompanied by media blackouts on daily cases, deaths and infections. In reality, 700,000 people around the world are testing positive for COVID-19, fueling mutations and undermining the very vaccines which are painted as a silver bullet. Vaccines, moreover, have only been accessible to less than five percent of the global population and are highly concentrated in the high-income countries.

Workers, including large numbers of health care workers are beginning to fight back across the globe. The outbreak of strikes and protests have erupted on every inhabited continent.

Workers in India are facing a nightmare of epic proportions. Over one million people have died and the country's infections account for half of all global infections. At least 150 bodies have been dumped on the banks of the Ganges River as hospitals run out of oxygen and have negative capacity as patients line hallways and are packed in storage closets.

In the over 17 months since COVID-19 has emerged, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have done nothing to support the inadequate and poorly funded health care systems in the country, an international phenomenon that exposes the conscious disregard for human life by the global elite.

Junior doctors, who are still trainees, are striking against the inadequate resources and dangerous conditions at all hospitals in the country where at least a quarter have become infected and have no access to vaccines. Dr. Arvind Meena, president of the Junior Doctors association (JUDA), explained that "Twenty-five percent of junior doctors have been infected by coronavirus to date. We are demanding a guarantee of bed allotment for the junior doctors who get infected."

Doctors are striking in Madhya Pradesh, a state located in the center of India, demanding better conditions as they too fall ill from this virus during a devastating surge of the pandemic. Doctors in Madhya Pradesh report being stretched thin, working up to 48 hours straight in hospitals that have unimaginable patient loads.

In Gujarat, to the west of Madhya Pradesh, and Punjab, a state in India's northern region bordering Pakistan, many other health care workers are going on strike over working conditions. In Gujarat, teachers at medical colleges and Junior doctors are demanding higher non-practicing allowance in line with 7th pay commission recommendations and the abolition of control appointments. In Punjab, the government has responded to a week-long strike for the regularization of their services by terminating all those who sought to continue it. Of the approximate 3,000 participants, about 1,400 stayed striking and were terminated on the grounds that they were endangering people through COVID-19 with this mass gathering.

In Israel, hundreds of doctors went on strike last week in various regions demanding job protection as they face layoffs. This past Monday, 600 doctors went on a 24-hour strike in opposition to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's decision to cut funding to the health care system which will lead to layoffs. One doctor who

supports the demands of the strike, Dr. Zeev Feldman, speaking to *The Times of Israel* explained: "...it's clear without 600 doctors who are central to treating patients, the quality of care will suffer. We won't allow this."

Israel has had over 830,000 cases and at least 6,300 deaths. Health care workers have been pushed to the brink, with long hours, and grueling patient loads. "After the state cheered the physicians and gave them lots of praise during the crisis, it's quite clear that things are returning to the old situation where health isn't a priority and all emphasis in funding goes to security. This should not be allowed to happen," said one supporter of the strike, Professor Nadav Davidovich.

The strike by doctors came during the escalation of attacks on Palestinians by heavily armed Israeli police and military forces that carried out a deadly airstrike on Gaza that very day. Already in a nightmare, doctors are caring for both COVID-19 patients and injured civilians in what has become an open warzone.

On May 5th in France, midwives went on a national one day strike against lack of PPE, vaccines and pay. Days later, on May 11th, French nurses from over 110 Intensive Care Units (ICU) protested, demanding more staff and better wages.

On May 7th, Bolivian health care workers held a 24-hour strike in opposition to the Emergency Sanitary Law, which bans protests and strikes. They also demanded that overdue salaries be paid, and a clear vaccine policy be presented, as they enter their third wave of the pandemic.

In Japan, health care workers have waged online protests which have resulted in hundreds of thousands of tweets opposing the government policy of sending workers to care for athletes and visitors in the Tokyo Summer Olympics. In response to the request for 500 Japanese nurses to work the event, one nurse from Nagoya, Japan, Mikito Ikeda is quoted saying: "Beyond feeling anger, I was stunned at the insensitivity. It shows how human life is being taken lightly...It's hard for a hospital to go without one nurse and they want 500. Why do they even think this is possible?"

On Friday, 30,000 New Zealand public sector nurses and health care assistants voted to strike over "horrific and unsafe staffing conditions." The announcement comes on the heels of a three-year freeze in wages announced by the Labour-Greens government for all public servants earning more than \$NZ60,000.

NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) spokesperson said nurses were "absolutely furious" at the announcement as

most have already progressed to the last step of their pay scale. NZNO members had already rejected a derisory annualised increase of 1.38 percent offer from the 20 District Health (DHBs).

In the New England region of the United States, health care workers in Massachusetts and Connecticut are also on the move. In Worcester, Massachusetts 700 nurses at St. Vincent hospital are entering into their 11th week of an open-ended strike demanding safe staff to patient ratios and PPE that determine life or death outcomes of patients. Tenet Healthcare, which owns the hospital, responded last week by threatening to terminate and permanently replace the nurses.

The threat of layoffs came just as Democrat Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont tapped the National Guard to intimidate over 5,000 nursing home workers fighting for a living wage and safe staffing.

Health care workers have been treated as expendable across the world, and their protests expose the opposition to the homicidal policy of "herd immunity" as well as the unsafe and exhausting conditions. Under these conditions, the trade unions, where they exist, have done everything possible to smother opposition.

This growing upswell of health care workers around the globe must find united and political expression. The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on workers across the globe to build democratic committees at every workplace and hospital and to unite with their international brothers and sisters in the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). Contact the WSWS today for assistance in building a rank-and-file committee in your area.



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