

French health care workers mount one-day nationwide strike

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On June 7, health care workers at hospitals across France struck to protest the lack of resources, low wages and a wave of emergency room closures in public hospitals. With these workers exhausted and outraged by intolerable working conditions in the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic, staff shortages are now reaching critical proportions and forcing major cuts to access to hospital care.

The strike is part of an escalating struggle of health care workers internationally against the subordination of medical care to private profit and the devastating consequences of the murderous official handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. In recent weeks, tens of thousands of health staff have struck in Scotland, Turkey, Madrid and in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia. Mass health care strikes in the US states of Minnesota, California and New Jersey are unfolding as health care workers have protested the attempt to criminalize nurse RaDonna Vaught for a medical error in 2017.

In France, access to medical care is endangered as President Emmanuel Macron's policies of austerity and mass COVID-19 infection run hospitals into the ground. Emergency wards have shut down periodically, often at night, or there is limited access in a number of hospitals. These include university research hospitals in Amiens, Angers, Bordeaux, Caen, Clermont-Ferrand, Dijon, Grenoble, Lyon, Metz, Nice, Orléans, Reims, Rennes and Strasbourg. There are also critical staff shortages in maternity wards, undermining proper pregnancy checkups and safety during births.

Doctors and nurses are warning that French hospitals are facing a meltdown without a massive injection of resources and personnel. Dr. Frédéric Adnet of Avicenne Hospital said: "Emergency wards are on the verge of collapse. It's a symptom and a result of a profound crisis of the hospitals, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to a lack of hospital staff, one ward out of five risks

being shut down this summer."

Dr. Anwar Ben Hellal at the Versailles Hospital predicted a "catastrophic" summer, where "people will arrive in emergency rooms and find the doors closed. ... Already people are dying due to lack of oversight, staff and beds." He added that after years of constantly working 70- or 80-hour weeks due to personnel shortages, staff were becoming utterly exhausted and leaving the profession.

WSWS reporters spoke Tuesday to striking nurses who were rallying outside the Health Ministry in Paris to protest.

Amélie told the WSWS: "We've always been striking for the same reasons since the last several protests: We do not get the resources we need for public hospitals. We neither get the material nor the staff resources. That is why we are here. ... It is very frustrating, we cannot properly take care of our patients."

"At the beginning of COVID, they said we were heroes, but now we are very clearly being abandoned," said Marine. When Amélie noted that French nurses in public hospitals are paid €1,400 monthly and up to €2,000 monthly at the end of their careers, Marine added that starting nurses are "paid like cashiers, but lives are in our hands."

WSWS reporters also spoke to Rachid, who talked about the explosive anger building up among health care staff over the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rachid recalled the essential role played by low paid nurses, food processing and retail workers during the first wave of the virus. Because of the strikes and mounting public concern, they forced Macron to adopt the first lockdown. He said, "During the first wave of COVID-19, workers who were paid 1,000 or 2,000 euros faced a virus that no one knew, and they were dying all over the hospitals.

"The health workers took over in the first wave. ... But

then the bureaucracy took back the power, and they continued shutting down beds,” Rachid said, adding that “no politician has taken the measure of the hospital crisis.”

WSWS reporters noted the staggering and horrific contrast between China and France. While China used a strict lockdown to eliminate the virus, in France, Macron allowed the virus to return and refused to track, trace and isolate cases. The result is that the virus surged back in France and in countries across Europe. While less than 6,000 people died of COVID-19 in China, nearly 2 million have died of it in Europe, including nearly 150,000 in France.

Rachid replied: “The image that stays with me from China during the first wave, is that they managed to build a hospital in 10 days. We were in the middle of a pandemic, and we were eliminating hospital beds.” He added, “You probably remember, you saw other health care workers using trash bags for protection, as if we were a Third World country. That is why many health care workers do not want to return to this job and why many will not return.”

He explained that the government’s palpable contempt for public health and safety is undermining support for the few remaining public health measures it is taking. While N95 or FFP2 masks are the minimum standard of protection, he said, “In my ward and for many of my coworkers, we only have surgical masks to go into rooms of COVID patients. So we find it hard to stay with a philosophy that we should wear masks, largely due to the incoherence of the government.”

He criticized the Macron administration for sacking health care workers who refused to be vaccinated but were testing negative for COVID-19, while ordering vaccinated nurses who were testing positive to return to work to treat vulnerable patients. He bitterly denounced the “flash mission” that Macron announced on May 31, setting up a committee to “evaluate” the needs of hospitals.

He said, “Look at nursing classes, they are empty like deserts. And among the few students that are there, the dropout rate is 50 percent. When they finally get to an internship, the oversight they get is so poor that they tell themselves, ‘There is no way I can have a career like this.’ So when Mister President goes and talks about a ‘flash mission,’ what a disaster. It’s yet another irrelevant thing.”

The way forward is to mobilize and unify the mounting international opposition among workers in health care and

other industries against the capitalist system. The horrific conditions in hospitals in France and internationally are bound up with decades of underfunding of health care by capitalist governments of all political colorations, now vastly exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

It is impossible to reverse the accelerating collapse of health care systems without a scientific policy to halt the COVID-19 pandemic and eliminate the virus. After Macron and all European Union (EU) governments have abandoned public health measures against the COVID-19 contagion, a new wave of the virus is emerging. France sees over 140,000 cases and 200 deaths from COVID-19 each week, amid the total indifference of the Macron government.

Moreover, Macron is plunging hundreds of millions of euros into NATO’s arming of Ukrainian units and far-right nationalist militias to wage war on Russia, a nuclear-armed power, and increasingly to threaten China.

The mobilization and international unification of health care workers depends on a break with the national union bureaucracies, who divide health care workers along national lines and try to blow off steam in toothless protest strikes. Workers need their own, independent rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions who negotiate state austerity policies with capitalist governments.

Building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWARFC) gives the working class the chance to organize and mobilize its industrial strength to stop imperialist wars, eliminate COVID-19 and wage a struggle for a socialist society that compels the use of social wealth to address urgent social needs such as health care.



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