

An open letter to New York nurses from a participant in the 2022 California nurses strike

A Stanford Nurse
16 January 2023

The following letter to nurses in New York was written by a Stanford nurse in California who participated in the strike last year. Nurses in New York are voting Tuesday on a sell-out contract agreed by the union, which shut down their strike last week.

Dear Montefiore and Mt. Sinai nurses,

As a California nurse who went on strike last year, I want to both send my support and alert my fellow nurses in New York to the position of strength you are in but also the danger you face at this point in your struggle. Think of this as a nurse-to-nurse report at the end of the shift. I am giving you the information we learned in our struggle so you don't make the same mistakes, and so you can further our collective fight as health care workers.

Our strike of 5,000 nurses took place at Stanford Health Care and Lucile Packard Children's Hospital at Stanford last year. Despite our strength, we were betrayed five days into our struggle by Stanford's union, the Committee for the Recognition of Nursing Achievement (CRONA), when they abruptly ended the strike late on Friday evening and handed us a shameful contract that has so far done nothing but worsen our working conditions.

The rank-and-file nurses had to fight to even receive a copy of the full Tentative Agreement. It wasn't until we began to organize a rank-and-file committee to take matters into our own hands that the full TA was released.

Our primary concern was safe staffing, and our contract offered nothing but vague pronouncements of a new staffing committee and a plan to begin to adjust staffing based on acuity.

The clearest indication that the contract was a

betrayal can be found in our current conditions. In early December a new and worse staffing grid was quietly released that called for fewer nurses on the floor. In addition, as a result of the "tripledemic" surge, hallway beds have opened up on our units, and the emergency room is under enormous pressure to send patients to the units as quickly as possible, giving us little to no time to prepare. Every day nurses call and text each other to convince nurses to come in early or pick up extra shifts when we're short.

Nurses everywhere know that improved staffing is key to taking back our profession. We cannot be compassionate and observant advocates for our patients if we continue to be pushed to take more patients, to skip breaks, to take on evermore exhausting workloads. The entire healthcare system is at a breaking point.

There is an enormous determination among nurses and healthcare workers to fight for better conditions, especially staffing. The unions know we are angry. They call us out on strike, but then they isolate us, ignore our democratic rights and work closely with the management to work out a "historic contract" that doesn't even come close to addressing our demands.

The trade unions, whether CRONA or NYSNA, have no solution to our problems because they are working within the framework of the for-profit medical system. Neither Stanford, Montefiore, Mt. Sinai nor any other hospital across the US has any intention of meeting our main demand for safe staffing because it would hurt their bottom line. The continuing pressure for nurses to do more with less bolsters the healthcare corporations, insurance companies, pharmaceutical and medical equipment companies alike.

We nurses have to take matters into our own hands,

developing a powerful movement of healthcare workers and nurses that attacks the problem at its root.

The issue of staffing cannot be separated from the uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 and the catastrophic state of the healthcare system in the US. We've learned this over the past three years as the corporate elite that run the hospitals and the politicians that once claimed we were "healthcare heroes" are completely indifferent to the lives and health of the healthcare workers and patients.

At Stanford, in mid-December, the hospital reached historic record capacity as the "tripledeemic" surge overwhelmed the area. One week later the hospital announced that only symptomatic patients would be tested for COVID-19, replacing the previous policy of universal testing at admission and before procedures. PCR testing for employees was also shut down. No doubt, more workers and more patients will be exposed and fall ill with COVID-19 as a result of these policies.

Over the past year, the hospital also stopped containing COVID-19 patients to specific units, instead spreading them throughout the hospital, even to oncology floors where the other patients are extremely immunocompromised. With poor staffing ratios, we don't have the resources to split assignments appropriately to accommodate this, so a nurse might be assigned a COVID-positive patient and a neutropenic patient, which we know isn't safe.

As conditions continue to erode, we turn to each other at the nurse's station and sarcastically ask, "Where's CRONA now?" When the snap vote was first called, we began to see who the union really was. Many of us got together to discuss what was happening. We formed a rank-and-file committee. We called for a NO vote, we raised our own demands and called for a statewide nurses strike.

Our fight at Stanford isn't over, and neither is yours. The struggle by healthcare workers has only begun. Now is more important than ever to continue your struggle and not accept the dictates of the union bureaucracy.

Vote NO! Neither the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) nor National Nurses United (NNU) is fighting for you. They isolated your struggle, separating you from your coworkers by signing separate sellout deals covering the other hospitals. The highlights of the tentative agreement—which they

continue to keep from you in full—show subinflationary rate raises and do nothing to address staffing.

Form a rank-and-file committee! As nurses we know how to communicate, how to plan, how to prioritize. You must do just this by forming a rank-and-file committee, elected democratically by nurses in order to take your fight into your own hands.

Broaden your struggle! Speak to each other, across hospital systems, across states, as I am doing now. We know the healthcare system is not safe. We know that our demands will not be met if we settle for what the hospitals are willing to offer rather than what we need. This kind of fight requires a plan, and it requires a mobilization of broad sections of the working class in NYC and beyond. You have massive support from healthcare workers and workers across all industries around the world and all around you in NYC.

Nurses and healthcare workers must fight for themselves against this corporate-driven attack, to take the profit out of medicine and to join a broader political struggle against the mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic.



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