

The DSA's role in the sellout of the New York City nurses strike

Elliott Murtagh
26 January 2023

The three-day strike by 7,000 New York City nurses at Mount Sinai and Montefiore hospitals earlier this month, which the union shut down with a sellout deal which did not meet strikers' demands, provides critical lessons for workers about the trade union apparatus and those around it.

Among nurses, there was support for a broader struggle uniting hospitals across the city, expressed in a series of near-unanimous strike votes. But they were broken up into separate sellout agreements by the New York State Nurses Association, undermining their unity.

A critical role in the sellout was played by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). It also played a role in assisting the betrayal of the Michigan Medicine nurses' contract fight last year, giving the union a "left" cover. The DSA is a middle class organization, staffed by union functionaries, Democratic Party officials and other careerists whose role is to prevent workers, who are becoming radicalized and moving to the left, from finding a genuinely independent road.

Nationwide, the DSA is either in the leadership or provides important support for the leadership of many major unions. Association of Flight Attendants president Sara Nelson is a DSA member and was a serious candidate for president of the AFL-CIO.

The DSA's conduct has shown that it is a pro-capitalist organization that has nothing to do with socialism. In December, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and two other DSA members in the House voted to ban a strike by 120,000 railroaders. The DSA also played a key role in the parliamentary maneuvering which allowed both parties to come together against railroaders, while providing a semblance of political cover for Democrats over the issue of sick days. This has contributed to a major crisis which has erupted inside the organization.

In health care, the DSA's role is not simply limited to preventing or limiting strikes. It long ago endorsed the profit-driven "herd immunity" policy of mass infection originally promoted by Trump and the extreme-right, but now endorsed by the entire political establishment.

Jacobin magazine, the de-facto house organ of the DSA, interviewed signatories to the pro-infection Great Barrington Declaration in late 2020 which called for the reopening of schools. Therefore, the DSA is in political solidarity with health policies which have produced the near collapse of the health care system and the very conditions of understaffing and overwork which nurses are fighting against.

During the strike in New York, the DSA was directly involved in both the bureaucratic organization of the strike and contract negotiations. As part of their "Union Power Campaign," the DSA organized tables with Team AOC (DSA member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's campaign team) and promoted Democratic Party politicians who joined and spoke at the pickets.

The DSA in New York City has a long history with the NYSNA. In 2019, according to Politico, the DSA's New York City branch targeted NYSNA as one of a few unions it was particularly focusing its work and resources on. An internal document stated that "DSA already has a density of nurses in NYSNA" and that a NYSNA reform caucus "has created an active, strong presence at Montefiore Medical Center."

Former NYSNA president Judy Sheridan-Gonzalez (2013-2021) has close ties to the DSA and attempted "to flip union leadership posts to DSA-affiliated members, according to several people familiar with the situation." Sheridan-Gonzalez was also part of the 13-member contract negotiating team at Montefiore during the recent strike.

After the strike was shut down, *Jacobin* published an interview article with the Montefiore ICU nurse and DSA member Michelle Gonzalez with the headline: "Nurses at Two New York City Hospitals Just Won Historic Strike Victories." Gonzalez is also a NYSNA executive committee member at Montefiore Moses and was also a member of the negotiating committee responsible for the new contract. She has participated in numerous DSA events and panels in the past.

In the interview, Gonzalez proclaims, "This has been a phenomenal victory for us as nurses." Asked about nurses'

concrete demands and if they were met in the TA, she raises short staffing: “I think the nurses of this institution are very demoralized by being short every single day... I’m excited about the language that we were able to negotiate for the nurses.” US Democratic Congresswoman and DSA member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez mirrored this rhetoric on the floor of the House of Representatives, the day the nurses strike ended.

In reality, the new TA for nurses does nothing to enforce safe staffing ratios. On the contrary, it institutionalizes understaffing by allowing management to violate set staffing ratios in exchange for paying fig leaf financial penalties which are less than the cost of hiring more nurses. The 170 new positions at Montefiore the agreement creates account for less than a quarter of vacancies, while the annual raises of 7, 6, and 5 percent will be more than eaten up by inflation.

In an interview before the strike with another pseudo-left publication, *Left Voice*, Gonzalez is asked about the experience of NYSNA nurses in 2019, when the union blocked a strike from taking place, and how the situation is different today. Here, she used the opportunity to defend the dividing up of nurses by hospital as a supposedly pragmatic maneuver.

“We were in multi-hospital bargaining last time, and those of us who supported a strike were outvoted. We learned that multi-hospital bargaining doesn’t work for us at Montefiore, so we’re bargaining separately.” This was echoed at an event this past weekend at The People’s Forum in New York City, by Judy Sheridan-Gonzalez at a panel discussion on Joe Burns’ book, *Class Struggle Unionism*. Burns is the director of collective bargaining for the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA union and also writes for *Jacobin*.

In reality, 17,000 nurses at eight hospitals across the city voted overwhelmingly to authorize strike action. This showed a great desire for unity and for the mounting of a broad struggle in defense of health care. The fact that most of these nurses never went on strike was due entirely to the fact that the NYSNA announced separate tentative agreements behind their backs.

In an online forum after the strike, DSA member, NYSNA bargaining committee member and former NYSNA board of directors member Sean Petty gave a lengthy response to an individual who shared a WWSW article on the ramming through of the NYSNA nurses’ contracts. The individual commented that she thought more hospitals should have gone out on strike together, that the struggle looked like a sellout deal by NYSNA bureaucrats and that she had heard as much from workers.

Petty rejected this and hailed the strike as “a victory for self-activity and militancy of rank-and-file nurses not the

bureaucrats,” with “major advances” for the “material conditions of rank-and-file nurses.” The DSA leader then blamed nurses for the shutdown of the strike, claiming falsely that they “had control of when they went back, not NYSNA bureaucrats.”

This is a lie. In fact, the NYSNA called off the strike on short notice only hours after the TA was announced. Nurses were not even given copies of the tentative agreement, much less the opportunity to vote on it, until after the pickets had already been taken down, in order to break nurses’ momentum and better ensure the contract’s passage.

To cover the bureaucracy’s tracks, he then blamed nurses themselves for the fact that they were divided up by hospital, claiming that, in spite of the near-unanimous strike votes, a unified struggle of nurses was both impossible and unpopular. “NYSNA staff...did not and do not have the influence to be able to ‘pull out all the hospitals at the same time.’ The idea that this would even be thrown out there as an idea reveals some pretty severe naivete about where consciousness is at right now.” This stands reality on its head. The nurses all wanted to go out together; it was the union bureaucracy which did not want them to.

The more that workers strike in defense of jobs and living standards, the more they are colliding with a well-developed corporatist system of control over them, which joins together the union bureaucracy with the state apparatus and corporate management. The DSA is revealing itself to be an important element in all sides of this conspiracy.

Workers must know who their friends and who their enemies are. The fight for real rank-and-file control means the exposure of the methods and parties to this conspiracy, including the DSA. It also means a fight against the bureaucratic smothering of their struggles through the formation of rank-and-file committees, new and democratic organs of power controlled by workers themselves and not the apparatus, which unite workers instead of dividing and conquering them.



To contact the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact