

Nurses in Louisiana and Pennsylvania threaten vote to go on strike as 5,000 Oregon nurses begin third week of picketing

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We invite medical workers at Providence and across the country to write to us about the conditions they face as a result of the ongoing social crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and the emerging threats to public health by the Trump administration.

The ongoing strike of 5,000 Oregon nurses, physicians and other medical workers entered into its third week on Friday. It is the largest ongoing strike in the US and the first major strike under the Trump administration.

There is enormous potential to expand the strike into a broader movement in defense of healthcare and the working class against the attacks by major corporations and by the science deniers in the Trump administration. Yesterday, 600 nurses at the University Medical Center (UMC) in New Orleans voted to authorize a two-day strike. The nurses have been fighting for a contract since March 2024, a situation reminiscent of many Oregon nurses, many who have also been without a contract for more than a year.

In Pennsylvania, an estimated 800 nurses at Geisinger Wyoming Valley Medical Center in Plains Township also voted to strike on Thursday. According to the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), of which the nurses are members, the facility is short-staffed by 300 positions which is “fueled by lack of competitive wages, exorbitant healthcare costs, and rising violence in the workplace.”

At each location, nurses face essentially identical issues: wages, safe staffing, healthcare and workplace violence, among others. Health benefits are of particular concern to medical workers who are working on the front lines amid the 10th wave of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic and a surge of the lethal H5N1 “bird flu” across the US.

But more than this, it is urgent that workers unite to connect their struggles against exploitation and inequality with a political fight against the Trump government’s attempts to establish a police state. This requires the development of a network of rank-and-file committees to share information, coordinate actions and act as a means of

democratic discussion and decision-making.

From this standpoint, it is significant that the Providence strike is centered in Portland. In the summer of 2020, during his first term, Trump placed the city under military-style occupation in retaliation against the nationwide protests following the police murder of George Floyd. This was part of Trump’s first attempt to overturn the Constitution and establish a presidential dictatorship.

Under the bogus guise of countering an “invasion” of Latino immigrants, Trump is attempting to repeat this on a far greater scale. Already, healthcare workers have taken to social media to discuss how to prevent federal agents from attempting to arrest their patients and co-workers, while teachers and students are being terrorized by federal agents at schools.

This is connected with far-reaching attacks on public health, which threaten to make even tracking the spread of disease impossible.

In order to wage an effective struggle, rank-and-file committees must be completely independent of both the union bureaucrats and the Democratic Party, who are bending over backwards to accommodate Trump.

Significantly, the Oregon Nurses Association has not issued a single statement either on Trump’s policies threatening immigrant workers and patients, or his war on public health. National Nurses United, with whom the New Orleans nurses are affiliated, has also not issued a single statement.

In fact, wide sections of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy have declared their willingness to “work” with Trump, especially on his “America First” policies.

This is the most direct expression of the bureaucracy’s corrupt relations with management. The ONA is working to isolate and limit the strike at Providence with a separate contract for emergency room workers at Providence Medford. It has done nothing to oppose Providence bringing in 2,000 scabs to ensure “smooth operations.”

Nor have any of the union bureaucracies involved sought to unite these disparate struggles of healthcare workers into a single unified fight. Instead, workers fighting in the same industry and for the same basic demands are left to fight in isolation against giant medical corporations like Providence and Kaiser.

The ONA has hailed a recent letter penned by 11 Democrats in the Oregon State Senate and House of Representatives which claimed to provide their “full support” for the healthcare workers on strike at Providence. The letter, written to Providence President and CEO Erik Wexler and Providence Oregon Chief Executive Jennifer Burrows, says that the signatories “hope” for a “fair and just resolution” of the strike.

The role of the Democratic Party

The letter is, however, more revealing for what it does not say. While the ONA claims that the letter is “support” from Oregon lawmakers, nothing in the letter makes mention of the attacks on public health, including the dismantling of all COVID-19 safety measures under Biden and the current onslaught against public health and science in general by the fascist Trump White House.

Trump himself was, during his first term, the original champion of the “herd immunity” mass infection policy towards the COVID-19 pandemic, which Biden expanded. The resultant excess deaths have topped an estimated 1.5 million in the US alone. In just the past five days, as Trump settles into his second term, he has withdrawn the US from the World Health Organization, placed a gag order on every agency under the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and threatened to dismantle the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Trump is also trying to push notorious anti-vaccine and pseudoscience peddler Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. as the head of HHS. If his nomination goes through, a man culpable for the deaths of millions around the globe as a result of spreading medical and scientific disinformation will have an official platform from which to further attack public health, including the fluoridation of the water system and the pasteurization of milk, just some of the major public health gains of the past century and a half now under attack.

If Kennedy is not confirmed it will be due to opposition from the Republican right due to his previous stance on abortion. Democratic Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, who counts Kennedy as a childhood friend, is reported to be seriously considering voting in favor.

In its press release advertising the letter from Oregon state lawmakers, the ONA specifically singles out for praise state Senator Aaron Woods, state Senate Majority Leader Kayse Jama and state Representative Travis Nelson.

Nelson is a member of the Portland DSA Caucus, alongside Representative Farrah Chaichi. At the same time, he has served as an officer of the Democratic Party of Oregon since 2017 and was chair of the Oregon’s Bernie Sanders delegation and Oregon delegation co-chair at the 2020 Democratic National Convention.

And while Nelson has expressed his support for the striking nurses, he has not used his position to mention once the dangers facing the working class from the Trump administration. In his three newsletters since Trump’s election, he has not mentioned the new president once. And on X/Twitter, his only explicit opposition to the fascist in the White House has been to Trump’s order putting all hires through Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programs on leave.

Such an outlook is representative of the anti-working-class character of the Democratic Party, as well as the DSA. They are attempting to chloroform public opinion and downplay the dangers represented by Trump because to state clearly what this government represents would expose the DSA’s functioning for decades as a faction of the Democrats, which it justified on the basis of a program of gradual reforms.

In reality, the Democrats, a pro-war party of Wall Street, have spent decades helping impose austerity on the working class. Biden, during his term in office, relied on his relations with the union bureaucracy to suppress or limit strikes and impose concessions. Now the Democrats and the DSA itself are responding to the danger of a fascist takeover by rolling over. They are more fearful of a movement of the working class than they are of dictatorship in America.

This is why there is an urgent need for nurses and every section of the working class to establish its political and organizational independence from the Democrats and union bureaucracy.

The working class must start with an international perspective and one that challenges the underlying disease of all of society’s ills, capitalism. This must be combined with the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the bureaucrats, the two capitalist parties of big business and the pseudo-left, and connect with other committees under the umbrella of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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