

National Nurses United misdirects opposition to Trump's abolition of federal union contracts

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Responding to its members' outrage, National Nurses United (NNU) recently issued a statement opposing President Donald Trump's executive order abolishing negotiated federal union contracts at 18 government departments deemed vital to "national security." One of the named departments is the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), which employs more than 15,000 registered nurses who are NNU members.

The NNU is the largest nurses' union in the United States, with over 225,000 nurse members.

On March 28, the NNU published a statement acknowledging that the order is "a brazen effort to intimidate and silence" nurses and "puts all worker protections in danger throughout the country." Yet the statement failed to put the attacks in the context of Trump's ongoing attempts to consolidate a presidential dictatorship and eviscerate democratic rights.

The NNU did not threaten a strike or any other workplace disruption, merely noting that "the union is exploring legal action." But nurses can place little faith in the courts, which uphold the interests of the financial oligarchy and the state. Appeals would ultimately be decided by the corrupt reactionaries on the Supreme Court, three of whom were appointed by Trump himself.

The threat to nurses and other federal workers cannot be overstated. In a memorandum that accompanies the executive order, the Office of Personnel Management directs agencies covered by the order to use the procedures of Chapter 75 of Title 5, United States Code, which authorizes the firing of workers when "necessary or advisable in the interests of national security."

In other words, any VA nurse who does not comply

with or disagrees with Trump's agenda will be fired. For noncitizen nurses, this could mean being detained in the same manner as international students like Mahmoud Khalil and Rümeyza Öztürk.

Nurses within the VA endure more demanding working conditions than their counterparts at similar healthcare facilities. A 2024 VA Office of Inspector General report found that 82 percent of VA facilities experience severe nurse staffing shortages. In addition, the implementation of a government-wide hiring freeze has led to concerns about the 66,000 unfilled positions within VA facilities, 13,000 of which are for nursing roles.

The NNU bears responsibility for creating these conditions at the VA by isolating and limiting strikes and pushing through sellout contracts allowing for reduced staffing and sub inflation wages. The union has not waged a serious fight to improve conditions at the VA and will not mobilize its rank-and-file membership now to defend the rights of nurses against the Trump administration.

The NNU's failure to call for a strike reflects not its cowardice but its unwillingness to jeopardize its own social interests. A strike would disrupt the union leadership's corporatist relationship with hospital management and the state. The union prefers to accommodate itself to Trump's fascist agenda rather than to risk triggering an independent movement of its own members.

The NNU leadership's actions since Trump's inauguration demonstrate its true priorities. In January, when Trump lifted the prohibition on immigration raids on "sensitive areas" such as hospitals and other healthcare facilities, the NNU did nothing more than

issue a statement of protest. “Hospitals should be places for healing, where all patients feel safe receiving care, without fear,” said the union in a press release.

Having committed themselves to providing the best care to all patients without discrimination, nurses strongly oppose Trump’s attempt to promote bigotry. But instead of organizing its members in a genuine defense of immigrants’ rights, the NNU called on the Trump administration—the very gang that is promoting xenophobia and police repression—to keep healthcare facilities “safe for all people.” Trump himself has built his political career on blanket denunciations of immigrants as violent criminals and lunatics.

In the same statement, the NNU referred to the “flurry of winter respiratory illnesses” that were circulating during the winter. This “flurry” is merely a preview of the future, now that Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has become secretary of the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

In response to the threat that Kennedy’s nomination posed — namely, the dismantling of public health—the NNU merely called on the Republican-controlled Senate to block the confirmation of this anti-vaccine activist and conspiracy theorist. The NNU has not organized any protests or strikes in defense of scientific truth or modern medicine. In the face of an unprecedented and multifaceted war on public health, which has included mass firings throughout HHS, the union has done next to nothing.

The NNU is playing the same role as the other trade unions, which is to suppress workers’ opposition to the policies of management and those of the US government. In response to Trump’s executive order terminating bargaining rights for employees of 18 government departments, the leaders of some of the largest trade unions held a joint press conference in Washington D.C., without advancing any concrete strategy for fighting back.

Participants in this empty show of opposition included Liz Schuler, president of the AFL-CIO; Lee Saunders, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees; and Everett Kelley, president of the American Federation of Government Employees.

Far from channeling workers’ anger into collective workplace action, these well-paid bureaucrats encouraged their members to turn to the courts and

write letters to their representatives in Congress. Schuler and company stood alongside Democratic Representatives Jamie Raskin and Steny Hoyer of Maryland and Don Beyer of Virginia. All three of these legislators voted to block railroad workers from striking in November 2022, as did most Democrats.

Like the Republicans, the Democrats are fully committed to the defense of the financial oligarchy and the waging of imperialist war. They have not merely failed to oppose, but actively aided Trump’s attempts to establish a dictatorship.

The Democrats’ support was crucial for the passage of the Laken Riley Act, which greatly expands the ability of police agencies to arrest and deport immigrants who have been accused of petty crimes—even if they have not been convicted. In March, top Democrats joined Republicans in voting to fund Trump’s government through September. The party helped pass a bill without any spending directives, thus enabling Trump and Elon Musk to fire tens of thousands of federal workers.

A rebellion against fascism and antiscientific quackery can only be led by rank-and-file nurses. To wage the necessary struggle, nurses must form new organizations that they themselves control: rank-and-file committees that are independent of the trade unions and of both capitalist parties.

These committees are the forum in which nurses can formulate their demands and elaborate a strategy for winning them. The attack on science affects every industry and forms part of a broader assault on the entire working class. Defeating this assault will require nurses to coordinate with workers in every sector of the economy to wage a common fight in defense of democratic rights and public health.



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