New York healthcare workers speak out amid strike authorization vote

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Nurses at six private hospitals in New York City are participating in strike authorization votes, and similar votes will soon be held at six other hospitals in the city. Safe staffing, wages and retaliatory disciplinary measures are major issues for the nurses, whose contracts expire on December 31.

Meanwhile, in Long Island, New York, nurses at Northwell/Huntington Hospital, Northwell/Plainview Hospital and Northwell/Syosset Hospital have been under contract talks for months. These workers and those in New York City all belong to the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA).

Nurses at Northwell/Long Island Jewish Hospital are preparing to vote on whether to join the union. The situation creates the possibility for a powerful, united struggle of thousands of nurses, but NYSNA has not raised this prospect. In fact, the union bureaucrats have a history of dividing and weakening its members.

In New York, as across the country, healthcare workers face an ongoing crisis of understaffing driven by continuing austerity, mass layoffs and increasing burnout among workers. Despite the state's safe staffing law, patient-to-staff ratios remain untenable, threatening patient outcomes and nurses' safety.

Nurses also are under attack at the federal level: The U.S. Department of Education is revoking the status of nursing as a professional degree, a move that will increase the financial burden of nursing school and discourage students from pursuing nursing careers. Meanwhile, President Donald Trump is eviscerating public health as part of his ongoing efforts to establish a dictatorship.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) recently spoke to healthcare workers in New York about these issues.

"We need more staff, period," said a tech at one of the hospitals voting to strike. "We are always short-staffed. Today I am by myself." The tech is responsible for 30 patients but has little support. "It's demanding. I have a nurse's assistant helping me, and she only does vitals. I have to do all the finger-sticks. I have to make sure I clean the patients with the nurses. I can't get to 30 patients quickly, you know, I have to prioritize.

"We have had no incidents. I think the nurses on my floor work pretty well together, but we're exhausted, burnt out."

When asked about the possibility of a strike, she replied, "A strike would be unfortunate, but something has to give. I think the unions are not fighting, just tiptoeing.

"Here [at New York-Presbyterian], I am a member of 1199SEIU, but I support the NYSNA nurses."

Asked about the designation of nursing as a nonprofessional degree, she said, "It is very disappointing. The nurses are the ones who save your life. I am going to school to be a nurse. It is disheartening. I don't even know if I want to continue. I am finishing my bachelor's degree in psychology, and I then was going to go to an accelerated nursing program. I love this job, but it takes its toll. It just feels like this is what I was supposed to be doing. I'm so passionate about it, and people don't realize how nurses do love what they do."

But the study involved in becoming a nurse imposes a financial burden. "I have debt already from the schooling, and Trump [taking away professional status] will make it worse for many."

Nevertheless, students will try to persevere. "The government is making cuts, but I think it is worth the investment," said the tech. "The nurses are the ones who are with the patient 24/7. They are the ones that even the doctors ask, 'What do you think I should do

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with this patient?' because they're the ones who know what to do. Trump is affecting patient care, period. I mean, imagine a nurse trying to juggle eight patients on an intensive care unit floor. It is almost impossible."

Asked about the roles of Trump and the Democrats, she said, "Trump wants to be a dictator. It is scary. I would be in favor of a general strike. The Democrats don't do enough. The Republicans control the government, but the Democrats should fight harder."

The tech said, "I have thought of socialism as an alternative. I feel like we pay enough to the billionaire class, where they should be giving back. I know that the CEO of New York-Presbyterian is making $14 million. Of course, we talk about it amongst ourselves. Why is he making so much money?"

When the idea of expropriating the billionaires was proposed, the tech agreed, "Every time I see a young individual running for politics, and their ideas are different, I am totally on board. I'm a little in the middle but I do support helping people just have a productive life. People are struggling, and they [i.e., the billionaires] are up there living their best life."

A physician told the WSWS, "Doctors also have a [staffing] shortage. The need is for more access to patient care. We need more doctors and nurses, although I am conflicted about a strike."

A research worker at New York-Presbyterian commented on the designation of nursing as a nonprofessional degree, "Making nurses not professional will only create more lack of personnel. The healthcare profession will not have a workforce and be able to help all who come to us. There is already a shortage for healthcare. Closing the doors against more people to come, the healthcare system will be crushed. Laws are made for a reason and need to be respected. It is bad for society to cut research and keep people able to find the best treatment."

Another researcher said, "I think pay is the most important demand. Colleges are affected by Trump's cuts. I am for socialism."

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