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Nurses who refused to care for coronavirus patients without N95 masks are suspended, union fights back and wins

written by John Parker
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Nurses at Saint John's Health Center in Santa Monica, California, were suspended because they refused to treat coronavirus patients without N95 masks. Nurses at the hospital are pictured raising their fists in solidarity after requesting the greater protection.



Photo: Marcy Winograd



SLL photo: John Parker

Los Angeles — In mid-April, 10 nurses employed at Providence Saint John's Hospital in Santa Monica, Calif., were suspended for demanding the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) to keep them from infection and possible death due to exposure to the deadly COVID-19 virus while working on infected patients.

The hospital administration claimed that the nurses already had the necessary equipment to remain safe and that N95 masks were not needed. However, one nurse at the hospital told the [Los Angeles Times](https://www.losangelestimes.com/story/news/local/california/2020/04/15/providence-saint-johns-hospital-nurses-suspended-covid-19/5144444002/) that she knew personally that this is not true. Angela Gatdula said she was exposed to COVID-19 while treating patients with

the virus. She tested positive for the virus on April 9.

Gatdula said she should have been given the available N95 masks since she was treating COVID-19 patients.

One of the suspended nurses, Jack Cline, who is especially vulnerable to the virus because he is also diabetic, told the L.A. Times that he refused to go into a room with an infected patient without the proper protection. Even doctors in that room, who did have N95 masks on, told him he should not enter without the proper mask. However, he was suspended and, like the other 10 nurses, threatened by the hospital administration, saying they may pursue having his nursing license removed.

However, that's not where the story ends.

The hospital administration underestimated the militancy of the nurses and their belonging to the largest nurses' union in the U.S., with more than 150,000 members nationwide. The National Nurses United is the largest union and professional association of registered nurses in U.S. history, the labor organization says on its web site.

Add to that the solidarity of the progressive movement and activists who came out consistently for the nurses. A well-attended and loud-honking car caravan protest on April 21 was organized by the union, which invited the community of folks in solidarity with the nurses to come out and demand the nurses be reinstated and given the necessary protections to do their jobs and remain safe.

For over an hour, honking horns were heard from cars adorned with signs in support of the nurses and circling the perimeter of the hospital.

The nurses' demands included greater hospital transparency regarding PPE, the lifting of ordered leave for nurses without masks who refuse to treat patients, and

the availability of hotel rooms where they can quarantine.

And ...

On that very same day, the hospital [reinstated the nurse](#) and will now supply nurses with N95 masks for those working with infected patients._

In spite of the challenges to continuing activism that exist during this COVID-19 crisis, with unity, creativity and especially solidarity, we can still make gains!

