

Good morning!

On behalf of National Nurses United, the largest nurses' union in the United States, let me say it's an honor to be with you at your national convention.

Nurses in the United States and New Zealand have so much in common.

We have common interests and face common threats so I am thrilled to be able to be with you and to be part of building the relationship between our two organizations and want to thank your leaders for inviting me here.

As a registered nurse of over 40 years and a proud trade unionist, I feel honored and grateful for the opportunity to speak to you all today about the our role of nurses as patient advocates in countering the ongoing attacks against our respective healthcare systems and against the nursing profession-- attacks that harm not only nurses but our patients and communities as well.

Our union is involved in a broad array of issues, ranging from fighting under-staffing in our hospitals and clinics, and fighting for dignity and respect for bedside nurses

from our employers to broader issues of economic and social justice.

Our union's politics stem from the experience of our nurses caring for patients at the bedside across the United States.

For the vast majority of our members—as I'm sure it is for yours-- nursing isn't just a job, it's a calling.

Nurses care for their patients at their most vulnerable.

We help bring people into this world at birth and care for them when they are on their death beds and when they are sick or injured in between.

It's not uncommon for hospital patients to confide in their nurses in a way that they won't with even their priest or minister.

And because nurses in the United States work in a health care system driven by profit, it makes it even more important to be advocates for their patients.

On a regular basis, nurses have to fight hospital managers to make sure their patients get the care that they deserve.

And we have to fight against a private health insurance industry that makes profits from denying people the care that they need.

We know while it's essential to carry on that fight within the four walls of the hospital, it's not sufficient.

Nurses probably understand more than most that simply treating the symptoms is not sufficient, you have to deal with the patient holistically and you have to get to the root causes of the disease.

That in fact is the origin of the word, "radical."

As any oncology nurse or patient will tell you, radical surgery means going to the root.

To be effective healers, we—all of us—have to go to the root causes of what afflicts this country and this planet.

And it's an economic system—call it neo-liberalism-- that prioritizes profits over people, that extols the virtues of the market at the expense of the community.

Indeed, it's an ideology and system that often even denies the very existence of community.

Our shared collective interests are what forges what we call “community.”

It’s what roots us.

It’s what bonds us.

No one understands this better than nurses.

Because the hospitals and clinics in which nurses work are essential parts of our shared community space— what in our country used to be called “the commons.”

Bedside nurses can be found in every community, and indeed are the backbone of those communities, not only across New Zealand and the United States, but in every country around the world.

And, as you talk to nurses from around the world, it is clear that, no matter what country they live in, we are facing amazingly common challenges.

Nurses on every continent understand—

as do the nurses of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation and National Nurses United—

that there is an absolute necessity for nurses the world over to unite together and to struggle together if we

want to successfully beat back the right-wing and corporate forces around the globe that are subjecting the world's people to austerity, poverty, and ill-health.

It's only by organizing a countervailing power of nurses and our community and labor allies that we will be able to win the adoption of nurses' values of caring, compassion and community.

I want to pay tribute to you and your leaders, and to those leaders who came before on whose shoulders we all stand, who were wise enough to build this national union.

It was done with an understanding that nurses everywhere need a strong nurses' union—

indeed, a nurse's movement—

that can advance nurses' working conditions and professional standards, and one that is devoted to a progressive vision advocating for your patients and your communities.

It was built with the understanding that the old labor adage rings as true as ever, "An injury to one of us is an injury to all of us."

By building this union, your leaders understood what in my country the great civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King always used to preach.

“We are all,” he said, “threads tied together in a single garment of destiny. We need each other.”

We need each other.

It's all the same struggle.

American nurses have come to the same recognition, which is why eight years ago National Nurses United was formed and today unites more than 150,000 RNs across the United States.

And for us in the States, it's more of a necessity than ever before as the corporations that dominate the American hospital industry and the American health insurance industry continue to consolidate and enrich themselves at the expense of patients and nurses.

We, too, like you, said we need to unite with each other and take on the big corporate and Wall Street interests together.

We have to look at the world beyond our respective national borders in the same way.

Corporate globalization has meant the increased power of multinational corporations and finance banks, whether they're located in Wellington, New York, London or Tokyo, at the expense of communities.

The impact on nurses, patients and our communities of the neo-liberal austerity agenda that dominates so many governments around the globe has been devastating.

Because globalization is not just about our world becoming more inter-connected.

It is fundamentally about profit-seeking by corporations and those financial interests.

It's about the grab for more and more power by the few at the expense of the many.

This austerity agenda is being perpetrated around the world, privatizing what used to be government programs, shredding social safety nets, pushing more and more people into poverty, crushing unions and devastating our planet.

It couldn't be starker in health care where in so many countries on every single continent there are moves to privatize previously public health care programs and close hospitals that are vital to the people who need care.

We saw it a couple of years ago in Liberia and Sierra Leone where nurses trying to care for people infected with the Ebola virus were not given the necessary personal protective equipment so they themselves contracted the virus.

So many nurses got infected and died that they started calling Ebola the "nurse killer" disease.

And those nurses in West Africa went on strike to demand this equipment.

But there were many in the US government and the US hospital industry who said, "yes, but that's a Liberia problem. It's a Sierra Leone problem."

We said no, it's our problem too and they scoffed at us.

And then Nina Pham and Amber Vincent got sick.



These were the two nurses at Texas Presbyterian Hospital in Dallas who got infected with Ebola while treating a patient.

And then the powers that be stopped scoffing but the hospitals still didn't want to provide the PPEs that we demanded.

And so nurses in the United States marched and we protested and we struck, and at least in California finally won a new government-imposed standard for PPEs for RNs and doctors treating suspected Ebola patients.

All the while we were in close touch with nurses' unions around the world about their efforts to protect nurses treating Ebola patients.

And the nurses unions around the world joined together and provided assistance to the nurses unions in Liberia and Sierra Leone and for those providing direct care there.

It wasn't just a Liberia problem, or just an Africa problem.

Ebola became everyone's problem.

It's all the same struggle.

And when we realize that, we also understand that we're stronger when we act together than separately.

As you might expect, the biggest private hospital corporations in the world are based in the United States.

And some of them are already in other countries and they are the poised like vultures to take advantage of the moves by right-wing governments to privatize their health care systems.

But nurses around the world are fighting back.

- Nurses in Kenya who are demanding to be treated with respect and to be paid a living wage.
- Nurses in India who are engaged in hunger strikes to demand regular employment rather than contractual work and who are fighting egregious sexism and racism by their government.
- Nurses in South Korea who are fighting against the privatization of their hospitals.
- Nurses in the Dominican Republic who are fighting against overcrowding in their hospitals so bad that it's not uncommon for one bed to hold two and sometimes three patients.

- Nurses in Honduras who feared to walk outside of their hospital unit out of fear of assault and harassment from the gang members, police and soldiers who patrol the hallways.

Nurses are marching.

Nurses are picketing.

Nurses are striking.

Nurses are occupying.

They're doing it for their jobs and their professional practice.

And they're doing it for their patients and their communities.

Two things become immediately clear when you see what is happening:

First, by and large our issues are really the same all around the world—

--Demands for safe staffing;

--Demands for better patient care;

--Demands for a government that provides quality health care for everyone;

--Demands to stop harassment, bullying and violence against nurses.

--Demands for proper compensation and respect for nurses and their right to engage in collective action.

And, second, there is an impressive amount of militant struggle going on by nurses on every continent around the world.

--Fighting back in their hospitals and in the streets for a better world.

--Fighting for a more just and humane society.

Just like here in New Zealand, nurses in so many countries are leading the fight for a better world.

And all of us can take great inspiration from these struggles and unite them with our own as one.

It's all the same struggle.

It is this sense of purpose and mission that drove us to create Global Nurses United just a few years ago at a meeting in San Francisco.

Nurses unions from Canada, the Philippines, South Korea, Australia, South Africa, Israel, Ireland, Brazil, Argentina, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, together with the NNU in the U.S., formed GNU dedicated to four main principals (and I want to read those principles from the declaration that we put out that day):

- We oppose the harmful effects on our nations, our people, and our communities, of globalization, neo-liberal policies, austerity, poverty, income inequality, and mal-distribution of wealth and resources, attacks on public workers, and climate change.
- We will resist the privatization of our public health systems and cuts in healthcare services.
- We will assist the efforts of nurses in all of our countries to secure safe care for all patients with safe nurse-to-patient staffing ratios and a safe workplace.
- We pledge our commitment for governments to guarantee the highest standards of universal healthcare as a fundamental, human right for all.

I can't think of anything more consequential and more profound than that.

In the short time GNU has been in existence, we have held several coordinated global weeks of actions.

And GNU is growing.

Since the GNU's founding, nurses unions from Uruguay and Paraguay and Greece and Kenya and Taiwan all joined GNU.

And just last year, so did the NZNO and I want to personally welcome you into the GNU family!

Our imperative is to build the kind of global solidarity that can go toe-to-toe with the global financiers and the corporations that want to profit off of people's illnesses and, instead, create a different kind of globalization—one of the collective power of nurses that can create a new kind of world.

--A world of compassion and community and caring.

Sisters and brothers, NNU is proud to stand with you in that struggle.

And when we do so, we stand on the broad shoulders of those women and men who came before us, who built our unions.

Together, let's rededicate ourselves to build a powerful organization of nurses around the world that can effectively fight for our rights as nurses and fight for our patients and our communities for the betterment of all.