

Invited Commentary

# On the global polycrisis: Speaking up for the ethical imperative of Left, socialist politics in nursing

In Germany, they first came for the Communists,  
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.  
Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.  
Then they came for the trade unionists,  
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.  
Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant.  
Then they came for me and by that time, no one was left to speak up.

Rev. Martin Niemöller, January 6, 1946.  
(Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, 2025)

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## Abstract:

Nurses *know how* to speak up. We bring powerful voices forward for justice, historically and currently, in all manner of forums local, regional, national, and global. However, we have not coalesced in any substantive way around the current global polycrisis of growing and blatant rights violations at the hands of governments' alt-Right promotion of unfettered capitalism and hatred of marginalized and racialized peoples. This editorial provides a description of Left, socialist politics and Right-alt-Right politics for nursing, with a call for nurses to join mobilization for Left politics to confront the global polycrisis of vast inequitable and widening global economic and social inequalities and climate emergency.

**Key Words:** Left, socialist politics; Right/alt-right politics; Big P politics; global nursing mobilization

Nurses *know how* to speak up. We bring powerful voices forward for justice, historically and currently, in all manner of forums local, regional, national, and global. However, we have not coalesced in any substantive way around the current global polycrisis of growing and blatant rights violations at the hands of

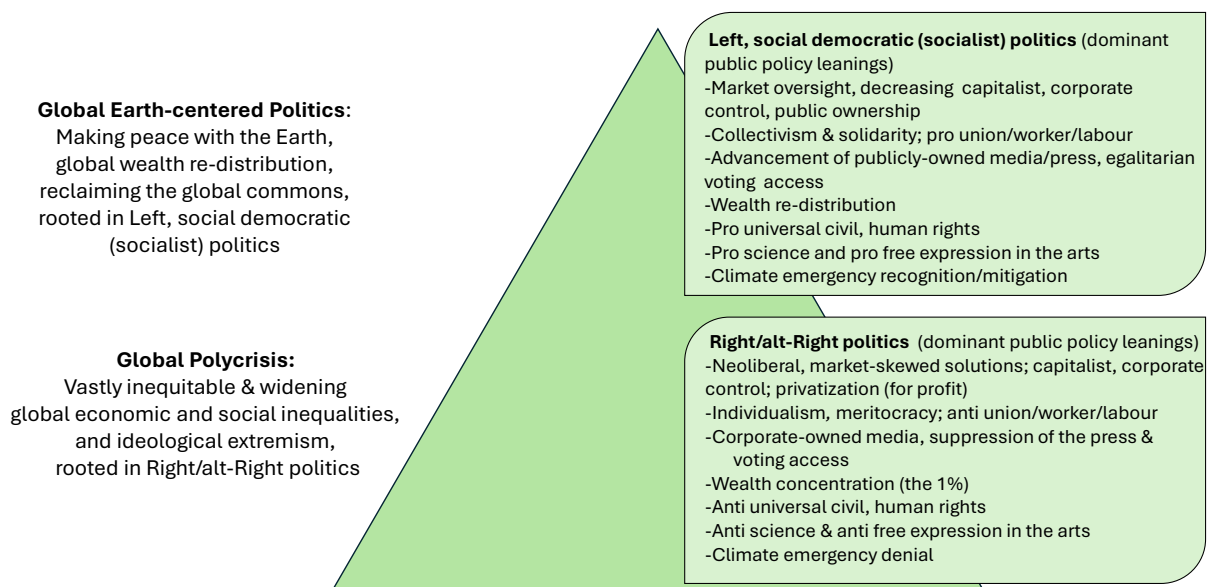
governments' alt-Right promotion of unfettered capitalism and hatred of marginalized and racialized peoples. Global polycrisis refers to an array of serious, long-term, and interconnected challenges—including, but not limited to, climate emergency, vastly inequitable and widening economic and social inequalities, and

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ideological extremism—with its own emergent dynamics (Cascade Institute, n.d., World Economic Forum, 2023; McGibbon, 2025). In the face of such need, political activism has not yet taken root in the nursing profession in any *widespread* and *sustained* manner. A bird's eye view of this conundrum may be seen in the focus of major nursing conferences over the past few years. The words “power”, “change”, and “taking charge” are common in calls for papers. They allude to systemic change initiated by nurses, but the language of social change, political resistance, disruption of the status quo, and resulting politicizing of health, are not explicitly promoted. There is no doubt that the planning of these conferences involved substantive work and dedication, and that the conferences are advancing important aspects of nursing practice and leadership. My point here is that nursing collectives such as these are powerfully political in their *hidden promotion of neutrality*. This absence of political and economic roots of health and illness, including

planet health and illness, speaks volumes about our parallel disengagement in ‘Big P’ politics—the nature and consequences of the Left politics and Right/Alt-Right politics of elected political parties and what they do to peoples’ health, planet health, and the health of all things on Earth. Figure 1 illustrates a working explanation of prominent Big P politics, focusing on the dominant ideologies and public policy leanings of Left politics and Right/alt-Right politics. The diagram provides a baseline for understanding power and politics, and can urgently inform taking sides for justice, a stance that is already embedded in our history. This representation is by no means meant to be comprehensive and there are not rigid lines between Left and Right/alt-right politics—there are instances where these two overall political leanings overlap in any given governance realm. Rather, it is a useful tool for exploring the complex issues involved in the Left and the Right/alt-Right, and hence a catalyst for speaking up.

**Figure 1: A Working Explanation of “Big P” Politics: Left Politics and Right/alt-Right Politics**



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Left politics is globally centered on what is called Nordic social democratic political economies (see McGibbon, 2024 for a brief nursing introduction to the political economy of health for nursing). The ideological inspiration is the reduction of poverty, inequality, and unemployment. Organizing principles are universalism and the socialist ideals of equality, the social rights of all citizens, justice, freedom, and solidarity (Bryant, 2016; Esping-Anderson, 2002). Significantly, Left, social democratic governments, such as those in the Nordic countries (e.g., Sweden, Finland, and Norway), have demonstrated that Left politics are very good for population health (Raphael, 2021). These countries consistently have the highest life expectancy, lowest infant mortality rates, and best measures of overall health and quality of life in “rich” countries (Bryant, 2016). Overall, on the Left we find promotion of Earth-centered politics, rooted in socialist, social democratic politics, including global wealth redistribution, and reclaiming the global commons. Prominent public policy leanings are market oversight; decreasing capitalist, corporate control of a country’s economy; public ownership of goods and services (e.g., health care, education); collectivism and solidarity; pro union/worker/labour; advancement of publicly-owned media/press and egalitarian voting access; wealth re-distribution; pro universal civil, human rights; pro science and pro free expression in the arts; and climate emergency recognition/mitigation.

Right/alt-Right politics are based in the ideology of liberty, with the stated neoliberal aim of relatively minimal government intervention and a focus on benefits available only through means testing (limiting access through screening), rather than universal availability (McGibbon & Hallstrom, 2021). Overall, on the Right/alt-Right we find promotion of vastly inequitable and widening global economic and social inequalities, and ideological extremism. Prominent public policy leanings are neoliberal, market-skewed solutions; capitalist, corporate control of a country’s economy; privatization (for profit); individualism, meritocracy (if we are well-off, we got there on our own merit, and

those who are poor lack the moral fortitude and ambition to advance themselves); anti-union/worker/labour; corporate-owned and controlled media; suppression of the press and egalitarian voting access; wealth concentration for the very few multi-billionaires and trillionaires (the 1%); anti universal civil, human rights; anti science and anti-free expression in the arts; and climate emergency denial.

The time is past due for nursing to mobilize with the nascent globe-wide mobilization of the Left, towards dismantling dominant neoliberal capitalist economies and creating Earth-centered alternative political economies (Dixson-Declève, et al., 2022) that uproot the persistence of political choices that feed mass poverty, disenfranchisement, social murder, and the age of extinction. As Chibber (2022) argues, the ideological validity of the neoliberal model of capitalism is collapsing and “there has been an unmistakable revival of Left anti-capitalist discourse at a scale not witnessed in two generations” (p. 1). The 2011 Occupy Movement; the 2019 youth-led Global Climate Strike; the 2003 Iraq war protests, the largest global demonstrations in human history; the popularity of Bernie Saunders’ run for the United States presidency; Jeremy Corbyn’s 2015-2020 Left, socialist leadership of the Labour Party in the UK; Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s ecosocialist La France Insoumise party; and the 2024 success of Mexico’s Morena party, led by Mexico’s first woman president, are recent examples of a political turn away from capitalism and towards mass mobilization for socialist change in the current world order. During the first three weeks of the 2023 crisis of colonialism in Palestine, globe-wide mobilization of approximately 3,700 pro-Palestinian protests took place in almost 100 countries and territories (Lay & Murillo, 2023).

As Thorne (2025) stated “Nurses actually were made for times such as these” (p. 2). A key strategy for moving forward is to collectively abandon the professions’ still-dominant stance of neutrality, because our silence is assent. South African anti-Apartheid luminary Bishop Desmond Tutu famously stated: “If you are

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neutral in situations of injustice, then you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality” (Younge, 2009). Whether we practice at the pointy edges of on-the-ground clinical or community-centered spaces, policy and leadership roles, research, teaching, or any other nursing practice areas, we have already demonstrated that taking sides is second nature.

We must now urgently meet the challenge to extend taking sides to the Big P political realm, where the structural drivers of the polycrisis can be effectively confronted with structural

change—at its root causes, often described as the “cause-of-the-causes”, which are built into/part of societal structures, including Right/alt-Right governance and public policy systems (McGibbon, 2025).

There is significant power in the vision and praxis of 28 million nurses and midwives worldwide. Our ethics can guide our imagination which can in turn create possibility. This kind of endeavour—that of dreams and imagination—leads us to what could be, if only we leap. (Dillard-Wright, 2024, Abstract)

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