

BREAKING NEWS

Detroit nurses forced to leave hospital after protesting understaffing

Evan Blake
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At around midnight Monday morning, seven night shift nurses at Sinai-Grace Hospital in Detroit were sent home after refusing to work in unsafe, understaffed conditions amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Sinai-Grace, the largest of eight hospitals in the for-profit Detroit Medical Center, has been inundated with COVID-19 cases in recent weeks.

Michigan now ranks as the US state with the third highest number of cases after New York and New Jersey, with most cases and deaths centered in the Metro Detroit region encompassing Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties. These three counties have a combined 12,556 cases and 539 deaths, numbers which are forecast to rise rapidly over the coming weeks, and which have already strained many hospitals to the breaking point. The city of Detroit alone suffered 38 deaths from COVID-19 on Sunday, bringing the city's death toll to 167, including three nurses (aged 40, 53 and 72) and a 37-year-old surgeon.

A video recorded by one of the nurses, Sal, makes clear that the small group of nurses were sent home after engaging in a sit-in protest in their break room, standing up for their rights and safety. The nurses' protest comes amid a wave of wildcat strikes and protests that have erupted internationally in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the demands of the ruling classes that nonessential workers continue to work to generate profit, while essential workers, including health care, food processing and delivery workers, risk their lives without adequate protection. In the Detroit region alone, wildcat strikes have erupted involving autoworkers, city bus drivers, and Amazon warehouse workers.

The video filmed by Sal has gone viral within hours of being posted. As of this writing, it has already been viewed over 125,000 times, shared over 6,750 times, and

garnered over 3,500 reactions and over 4,200 comments. A separate post of the video has been viewed over 75,000 times and shared 1,800 times, with over 750 reactions and over 550 comments.

In the video, Sal states, "We were told to leave because we refused to accept unsafe patient loads." Another nurse adds, "Twenty-five patients to one nurse!"

Sal comments, "This is the amount of nurses we have for the night shift," pointing to the six nurses on camera, with one other nurse still inside on orientation. He continues, "they want us to go out there and accept 68 patients, multiple [patients requiring ventilators], and so everybody left. We were told to basically leave."

One nurse approaches the camera and angrily states that management "weren't even willing to put on scrubs and help us. It was 'you're not getting any more staff—you can leave the premises.'" Another nurse summarizes the position of management as saying, "You ain't gotta go home, but you got to get the hell out of here!"

A nurse states emphatically, "Something needs to change. You have to make a stand at some point to get a change."

Nurses on the previous day shift, who began working at 7 a.m. Sunday, were kept on the job after the night shift workers were told to leave. One nurse suggests that they "start calling day shift to get out." Later on, a nurse reports that she FaceTimed a day shift nurse, who said, "all of day shift loves you all forever."

Near the end of the video, Sal explains in more detail what happened, stating, "They sent us home because we refused to come out. Since 7 p.m., we've been in the break room, trying to tell them we need more staff for tonight, because it's unsafe. They came in and asked what our demands were, and we said we only need staff, pool people if you can. After four hours, they told us they

‘can’t pool nobody and nobody else is coming in. What do you all want to do? Either go out or go home.’ So, I mean, we have to take a stand at some point.”

At another point in the video, Sal states, “Sinai-Grace is like the epicenter for this coronavirus. We’ve had three straight weeks with over 110 patients, and an average of 12-14 nurses. At night, that drops down to about eight nurses, and we’ve been accepting that and working hard. But tonight, it was the breaking point for us, because we cannot safely take care of your loved ones out here with just six, seven nurses, with multiple people on [ventilators], multiple people on drips. It’s not right.”

He continues, “We had two nurses the other day with 26 patients, with 10 [that needed ventilators], and nobody was out here to help them. It’s not acceptable.” Multiple nurses reiterate, “It’s not acceptable,” while one states emphatically, “We want the public to know, we’re fighting for you all!” which is seconded by another, “We’re fighting for you all and your loved ones!”

When Ty, the final night shift nurse, exits the building, one nurse shouts to him, “Fight the power!”

Two more nurses exit the building during the video, including one that had volunteered to help from another hospital, who was told to go home by management without explanation. Another nurse, Phil, was also sent home without explanation, and Sal says that it was his second day back after testing positive for COVID-19.

On the Facebook video, there has been a flood of comments in support of the victimized nurses.

One commenter, Jimmian, wrote, “Horrible. For both the staff and the patients. I don’t blame the staff one bit. It is impossible to expect them to take care of that many patients. Heartbreaking for both sides.”

Victorria, a nurse from Texas, wrote: “25 patients! There is absolutely NO way 1 nurse can take care of 25 patients. That is insane! All of the nurse managers, assistant nurse managers directors, educators, supervisors, case managers, anyone with an RN license in that hospital should be in scrubs with a patient assignment BEFORE any nurse is given a double-digit patient assignment!”

Leilani wrote, “Sorry to see it come down to this but any nurse who works ICU knew it was coming! I support you in Wisconsin.”

Another commenter, Meghan, said, “Management didn’t put on scrubs and help?? that is horrifying.”

Jamie commented, “These nurses stood up to the administrators and demanded a safer working environment for both staff and patients. I feel horrible for the day shift. But the conditions these brave nurses were

working with was costing lives and exposing them to unnecessary dangers.”

The struggle of Detroit nurses is the latest in a series of protests by nurses and other health care workers across the US in the face of a gross lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), testing kits, ventilators and trained staff to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. The National Nurses Union (NNU) reports that only 19 percent of nurses in the US have enough PPE to protect staff and patients, while only 52 percent have access to N95 respirators nationwide, a product of the subordination of health care to the profit motive. Multiple nurses across the US have been fired for protesting these conditions and speaking to the media.

Beaumont Health, the largest health care system in Michigan, implemented a new policy on Friday which mandates that any health care worker who refuses to work with COVID-19 patients will be terminated and ineligible for future employment. The only exception made is for those with underlying conditions.

On Sunday, Beaumont also announced that they’ve begun disinfecting and reusing N95 face masks for those treating COVID-19 patients, in violation of basic safety protocols. As of Sunday, Beaumont health care workers have been caring for 1,074 confirmed COVID-19 patients.

Detroit, one of the poorest large cities in America, is also slated to become a testing ground for clinical trials on the use of the anti-malarial drug, hydroxychloroquine, which Donald Trump has repeatedly and falsely touted as a miracle drug to relieve symptoms of COVID-19. At the White House press conference Sunday, Vice President Mike Pence announced that Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit will begin a 3,000-person study on the use of hydroxychloroquine, which can cause a heart arrhythmia that can lead to cardiac arrest, as well as psychiatric symptoms and other serious side effects.



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