

Over 800 nurses strike Philadelphia area hospital for improved staffing

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19 November 2020

Over 800 nurses at St. Mary Medical Center in Langhorne, Pennsylvania, 30 miles northeast of Philadelphia in Bucks County, went on strike Tuesday morning after management refused their demands to improve staffing levels at the hospital. Working conditions for the staff are at dangerously low levels, endangering nurses and patients amid the surging COVID-19 pandemic.

Like the United States in general, Pennsylvania has seen a spike in infections with the seven-day average for new cases climbing tenfold from 500 in July-August to over 5,000 now. The positivity rate has shot up from 5.9 percent to 23.1 percent during the same period.

Last week, 911 emergency responders had to divert all new patients from St. Mary's for 15 hours because the hospital was full and could not handle any more patients. The strike at St. Mary's is only the latest expression of growing outrage of healthcare workers throughout the United States who are risking their lives without adequate resources while officials allow the pandemic to spread uncontrolled.

Beth Redwine, a nurse, told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that she and her co-workers are striking for the community. "Truly, the reason we are out here is that, God forbid, they have to come to the hospital, we can give them the care and attention they deserve," she said. Other nurses told the paper that it is impossible to keep staff when they can get paid \$6-7 an hour more at nearby hospitals.

Understaffing is particularly dangerous because hospital workers must place a COVID-19 patient on their stomach to help with the task of breathing with a ventilator. This life-saving technique, called "proning," requires "up to a half-dozen nurses and aides to perform," Rebecca Givans, a labor studies specialist at

Rutgers University, told *National Public Radio*. "Having a shortage of staff means that every COVID patient cannot have that level of care and people may die because of that."

Nurses at St. Mary Medical Center voted to join the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals (PASNAP) last year, but the union has not been able to negotiate its first contract yet. Nurses voted by 85 percent to authorize the strike.

Hospital management has attacked the nurses for walking off the job during the pandemic and has pledged to keep the hospital working with non-union staff. Although the union announced that the strike would only last two days, the hospital said it would not allow nurses to return to work until Sunday.

"We are hearing concerns from our community that PASNAP, which has placed patient safety at the center of their platform, would choose this time—when the country and our local community contend with a COVID-19 surge—to exercise their right to strike," hospital officials said in a statement.

This is completely cynical for officials who sit in corporate offices far away from the viral spread and more concerned about containing costs and boosting shareholder returns than ensuring safe conditions for patients and hospital workers alike.

St. Mary's is one of the most profitable hospitals in the Philadelphia area, making an average of \$58 million in profits in each of the last three years. It is owned by Livonia, Michigan-based Trinity Health, a massive "non-profit" Catholic health system, which operates 93 hospitals and 120 continuing care locations in 22 states. Trinity CEO Michael Slubowski pocketed \$2.5 million in the year ending June 2019, according to company records.

Trinity received \$600 million in federal grants in

April and May as part of the \$175 billion CARES Act bailout of healthcare providers by the US Congress and another \$1.6 billion of Medicare advance payments. Nevertheless, Trinity has furloughed workers and slashed costs to compensate for lost income during the pandemic.

This has only increased the dangers of exposure for health care workers who have seen 1,700 of their colleagues die from COVID-19 since the pandemic began.

“Who is going to take care of my two daughters if I get sick and die,” asked a Pittsburgh nurse who is supporting the strike. “There is no one to care for them. Worse yet, what if I bring it home to them and one of them gets sick.”

“Healthcare workers are not slaves. They are in no way obligated to work in unsafe conditions,” one commenter supporting the strike posted on social media.

The number of COVID-19 cases in Pennsylvania is only expected to rise as the winter months set in. This weekend, hundreds of thousands of college students, many infected with the coronavirus, return home for the extended winter break and will only lead to greater spread.

In the face of the growing pandemic, the Democratic administration of Governor Tom Wolf has taken no action to stop the spread. He is following the lead of Republican President Donald Trump and President-elect Joe Biden, repeatedly stating that the government will not issue another stay-at-home order.

Nurses at three other Philadelphia area hospitals have also voted to strike. While nurses at Mercy Fitzgerald in Delaware County reached a tentative contract, staff at St. Christopher’s Hospital for Children in Philadelphia and nearby Einstein Medical Center have voted overwhelmingly to strike.

PASNAP has not called out these nurses, forcing the St. Mary’s nurses to strike on their own. PASNAP and other unions do not want a broader struggle which would immediately come into conflict with the Wolf administration and the Democratic Party.

St. Christopher’s Hospital for Children in Philadelphia was bought last year by Tower Health and Drexel University, which began cutting staff almost immediately. The hospital has closed down one of two floors that care for children suffering lesser afflictions.

This move forced staff to keep children longer in the emergency room and intensive care than they need to be.

One registered nurse at St. Christopher’s told CNN that staffing was the “number one issue.” In a scathing denunciation of the for-profit health care system, the nurse said. “We’re in an era of health care being run by hedge fund groups. They do not care about where or how long they run as long as they make them profitable. They’re not invested in these hospitals.”

While nursing staff is being cut, Clint Matthews, the CEO of Tower Health made nearly \$2.8 million last year, and Einstein CEO Barry Freedman’s made nearly \$4 million.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party are working for the building of rank-and-file committees of health care workers, independent of the unions, which are tied to the corporate structure and the Democratic Party.

These committees will fight to unite all healthcare workers in a struggle to demand that the necessary resources be diverted away from Wall Street and the corporate oligarchy and be used instead to eradicate the pandemic. This includes fortifying health care infrastructure and closing non-essential production while providing full income to all those unable to work. At the same time, workers must fight to abolish the for-profit health care system, the nationalization of the giant hospital, medical equipment and insurance chains, and the establishment of a system of socialized medicine to provide free, high quality care to all and guaranteed good living standards and safe working conditions for health care workers.



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