

St. Vincent nurses in Massachusetts in fourth week of strike for safe staffing

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Nurses at St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts are entering the fourth week of strike action. St. Vincent is owned by Tenet Healthcare, a Dallas, Texas-based conglomerate that has so far spent at least \$22 million to hire strikebreaking replacement nurses.

After a series of federally mediated negotiations, the nurses, represented by the Massachusetts Nurses Association, took their demand for safe ratios and patient care to the picket line on March 8.

Roughly 700 nurses maintain the picket in shifts. Two entrances, one to the parking garage and to the loading docks, have become hotspots. Last week, the hospital installed two surveillance towers to monitor both entrances 24/7, under the pretext of maintaining safety. Worcester police officers, paid for by the hospital to keep the entrances open at a rate of \$30,000 a day, installed a surveillance camera of their own.

Even before the pandemic, medical-surgical nurses at St. Vincent were facing a rise in patient acuity, increasing demands on their labor, which have led to burnout and adverse patient outcomes. Studies have shown that safe ratios lead to better patient outcomes and lower morbidity. Administrators at St. Vincent Hospital, however, like at so many other hospitals, have “flexed” ratios in order to maximize profits. Before the pandemic, nurses would regularly have to care for six or seven patients, even though their contract called for a maximum of five.

When St. Vincent Hospital was forced to cancel profitable elective procedures at the beginning of the pandemic, many staff were furloughed, some leaving for good. The intensive care unit (ICU) was overrun, nurses converted the progressive care unit into a makeshift ICU and medical-surgical nurses were maxing out on assignments full of COVID-19 patients, some of whom should have been in the ICU.

Nurses are not the only staff who have been forced to

work under unsafe ratios. Ancillary staff, including secretaries, personal care assistants (PCAs), critical care technicians, operating room technicians and respiratory therapists, have all had to take on assignments far beyond what is safe.

In a video posted to Facebook by United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1445, which represents many ancillary staff and recently came to a sellout agreement to avert a strike by its 600 members, some PCAs reported working for 60 hours a week and caring for up to 20 patients at once, when safe levels max out at six or seven.

Striking nurses at St. Vincent do not receive strike pay from the Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA) and must demonstrate financial need to access the union’s ad hoc relief fund. Meanwhile, the parent company of St. Vincent Hospital, Tenet Healthcare, with no lack for resources, has been spending with over \$5 million a week in an effort to break the strike.

Nurses to whom the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke on Thursday expressed anxiety over the decision to be made soon by the state as to whether or not they will be eligible for unemployment benefits. Hospital administrators have waited until the last minute to submit paperwork to the state in order for this process to begin in a clear-cut attack on the nurses’ financial survival.

As reported March 31 by the *Worcester Telegram*, some nurses are reporting financial distress. Meredith Mongeon, 49, a St. Vincent nurse of five years and a single mother of two, told the *Telegram* that she has needed to rely on the food bank and the recent government stimulus check to make ends meet.

While the MNA refuses to provide its nurses with strike pay, dozens of union bureaucrats take home six figures annually, and the union is the second biggest lobbyist of the state government on Beacon Hill, only outspent by the Massachusetts Health and Hospital Association, which

lobbies for the health care industry.

Instead of furnishing strike pay for the thousands in dues paid annually, the union has set up a relief fund to receive private donations, which the MNA matches dollar for dollar, reminiscent of philanthropist charities. So far it has raised \$69,400 in donations. If matched, the approximately \$140,000 makes a pitiful dent in the millions of dollars owed to the hundreds of nurses who soon will have been without a paycheck for four weeks.

By comparison, the MNA controlled \$11.2 million in net assets and \$9.2 million in cash as of June of last year, according to the latest LM-2 filings with the US Department of Labor. The cash on hand alone would be sufficient to pay the nurses \$750 per week in strike pay for over 17 weeks. The union also spent more than \$9 million on salaries for union officials in the preceding 12 months, including for more than 50 staffers making more than \$100 per year.

When WSWS reporters spoke with the union's executive director Julie Pinkham (annual compensation: \$214,746), she noted that the high demand for vaccination workers at nearby state-run facilities might serendipitously provide some of the striking nurses with temporary employment in order to make it through the strike.

David Schildmeier, MNA director of public communications, (annual pay \$169,983), told the Telegram that the union has “provided extensive resources to assist nurses in finding alternative work during the strike to ensure that all the nurses, no matter their circumstances, have the support they need to stay on strike as long as it takes.”

In other words, instead of providing strike pay, the MNA is advising its members—who are putting their jobs on the line and sacrificing their paychecks as they walk the picket line—that they should seek “alternative work,” creating the conditions in which the nurses could be permanently replaced.

There is widespread popular support for the nurses within the Worcester community. They receive a steady stream of support from the car horns of passersby on the busy thoroughfare.

On March 24, a candlelight vigil was held on the picket line by community coalition representing 21 interfaith organizations.

An online poll run by the Telegram showed widespread approval of the strike, while Facebook commenters were quick to identify and denounce a pro-Tenet op-ed in the Telegram, written by a former St. Vincent vice president.

However, the MNA and the UFCW have refused to mobilize this support for the striking nurses. The MNA is the third largest union of professional nurses and other health care workers in the US. According to the MNA, it has “more than 23,000 members working in 85 health care facilities, including 51 acute care hospitals, as well as a growing number of nurses and health professionals working in schools, visiting nurse associations, public health departments and state agencies.”

However, the strength of this membership has not been mobilized to stop St. Vincent from bringing in replacement nurses to cross the picket lines or to organize strikes at other health care facilities across the state, where nurses and other health care workers face similar conditions. The UFCW came to a deal with St. Vincent, keeping support staff on the job in the midst of the nurses' strike, undermining their struggle.

The expansion and unification of their strike with other struggles of the working class requires the formation of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, completely independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* encourages the nurses of St. Vincent hospital, along with ancillary staff who are members of Teamsters Local 170 and UFCW Local 1445, to form their own rank-and-file committees, uniting their struggle with other health care workers in Massachusetts, the US and internationally. A powerful contingent of health care workers could become a powerful force alongside rank-and-file committees formed by educators, Amazon workers and autoworkers.

Such committees are the form through which workers can advance their own demands, including emergency measures to stop the coronavirus pandemic and ending the unsafe reopening of schools and workplaces, with full compensation for workers and small businesses.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party are working to promote and assist in the establishment of such independent workers' organizations, connecting the growth of the class struggle to a socialist political perspective and program. We urge workers interested in establishing such committees to contact us today .



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