

Tenet Healthcare hires nurses to “permanently replace” strikers at Massachusetts hospital

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Seven hundred nurses who have been on strike at St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts for more than nine weeks are now being threatened with mass firings by Tenet Healthcare. The Dallas-based healthcare giant announced Wednesday it would begin hiring nurses to “permanently replace” the strikers.

St. Vincent Hospital said in a news release that it plans to fill around 50 nursing positions, including all day-shift positions scheduled for 32 hours or more per week in critical care and all but one inpatient medical-surgical unit. At the same time, Tenet’s website has posted openings for scores of positions at the hospital, with sign-on bonuses of up to \$5,000.

Attempting to paint the company’s blatant strikebreaking in humanitarian colors, St. Vincent Hospital CEO Carolyn Jackson said that, “bringing in permanent replacement nurses will help ensure continuity of care as the strike continues.”

Defying these threats, St. Vincent nurses remain determined to win their central demand for safe patient-to-staff ratios, calling for one nurse for every four patients on medical/surgical floors and telemetry units, as well as increased staffing in the emergency department and ancillary support in each unit.

Staffing ratios are the determining factor of life and death outcomes in patients, an issue that has become even more pressing during the pandemic. For this reason, the demand for increased staffing—bitterly resisted by the corporations—continues to be central in the struggle of all healthcare workers.

Tenet has been emboldened to escalate its attack by the isolation of the St. Vincent nurses by the AFL-CIO and other unions. In the face of Tenet’s threat to fire the nurses en masse like President Reagan did to

striking air traffic controllers in 1981, the Massachusetts AFL-CIO has taken no action to defend the embattled St. Vincent nurses, even though there are tens of thousands of nurses and other unionized healthcare workers in Boston and other cities. The other state nurse associations, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and other healthcare unions have kept tens of thousands of their members on the job at Tenet-owned hospitals in California, Michigan, Florida and other states.

Tenet’s threat comes as Democratic Governor Ned Lamont in neighboring Connecticut has deployed the National Guard to intimidate and threaten 3,000 nursing home workers set to strike on Friday for increased staffing and an end to poverty level wages that average between \$13 and \$16 an hour.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team visited the St. Vincent picket line to speak to striking nurses. They discussed the strikebreaking threat against the Connecticut nursing home workers and last week’s rallies at three Tenet-owned hospitals in Southern California by hundreds of respiratory therapists, nursing assistants, X-ray technicians and housekeeping and food service staff.

Striking nurses at St. Vincent expressed their solidarity with the Connecticut and California healthcare workers and readily agreed with the call by the WSWs for a unified struggle of nurses and health care workers in the US and internationally. The strikers also said they were being completely kept in the dark about the status of other MNA bargaining units and were surprised to learn many were working with expired contracts. As one nurse put it, “There’s the bargaining committee and then there’s us.”

The St. Vincent nurses have endured horrendous conditions, including contracting COVID on the job while St. Vincent refused to acknowledge it. Nurses were forced to buy PPE from co-workers, wear trash bags, shower curtains, and repurposed chemical-laden Ford Motor Company airbag material as gowns.

Adding to poor PPE is inadequate patient care and insufficient staffing for both nurses and their support, such as patient care assistants (PCA), which should have a care ratio of one PCA for eight patients. One nurse told the WSWS that “(On one floor) we have 32 patients so that should be four on each hallway, but (we’re) always short.”

As nurses told reporters, St. Vincent management gives nurses blankets to put on the floors for extra padding should unattended patients fall out of their beds. They described one situation where an 85-year-old patient, due to inadequate staffing of nurses and unit secretaries, was calling out for assistance for three hours before a housekeeper heard her pleas.

During the height of the pandemic, nurses were also forced to accept tasks that endangered their patients’ health and threatened the integrity of their professional licenses. Having never intubated a patient, they were expected to assume ICU-level responsibilities after last-minute 3-hour ‘flash’ trainings. This led to preventable patient deaths. Speaking to reporters, one nurse described it in all-too-familiar detail. “It was like a mass shooting in there during COVID, it was just a disaster.”

One nurse exclaimed, “It doesn’t matter (to Tenet) because when I’m gone there’s someone else to replace me...It doesn’t matter if you’ve been working 16 hours and you’re exhausted. You’re a just a body. At the end of the day, it’s our license, so if we mess up it’s my name that’s on that patient’s chart, it’s my license, they don’t take responsibility.”

Even as hundreds of its members now face the threat of mass firing, the Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA) continues to downplay the dangers facing nurses. In response to Tenet’s announcement, MNA officials released an impotent statement, declaring that nurses “remain unmoved by the announcement, having fully expected Tenet to move in this direction, and see it as yet another desperate attempt to avoid negotiating in good faith...”

In fact, two weeks ago nurses overwhelmingly rejected

a contract offer from Tenet, which was brought back to them by the MNA even though it ignored the strikers’ staffing demands. Despite months without pay on the picket line, the nurses responded to the deal with scorn and indignation.

If the strike is not to be defeated, nurses must take their struggle into their own hands, by forming a rank-and-file strike committee. This committee must call on all workers to take solidarity action and organize mass pickets at St. Vincent to stop Tenet’s strikebreaking. This committee should call for strike action across all of Tenet’s operations to win safe staffing levels for all workers.

Such a struggle will immediately lead to a direct confrontation with the Democratic Party, including Worcester’s Democratic Mayor Joseph Petty, who since the first day of the strike on March 8 has deployed police to escort scabs through the strikers’ picket lines. From Mayor Petty to Connecticut’s multi-millionaire governor to the Biden administration, workers confront in the corporate-controlled Democratic Party a class enemy just as hostile to their interests as the Republicans.

That is why the industrial mobilization of the working class must be combined with building a powerful political movement, independent of both big business parties, and aimed at the fight for a socialist reorganization of society, including the establishment of a system of socialized medicine.

We urge St. Vincent nurses to contact us and join the fight to expand the national and international network of rank-and-file committees.



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