

Anger builds among St. Vincent nurses as union continues to isolate their four month-long strike

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The strike by 700 nurses of St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts has entered its 14th week. Nurses have bravely struck to demand an end to unsafe nurse-to-patient staffing ratios. Despite receiving no strike pay from their union, the nurses are resolved to fight for the lives of their patients, a central and universal demand of health care workers around the globe.

Their strike remains the most important struggle of healthcare workers in the United States and must be followed closely by the international working class. Tenet Healthcare, the Dallas-based owners of St. Vincent Hospital, has begun listing over 100 of the nurses positions to be filled by permanent replacements in a retaliatory move.

Tenet Healthcare is a giant in the health care industry, and has spent an estimated \$70 million on scab labor and the policing of the picket line to break the nurses determination. Tenet will spare no expense or tactic to break the struggle of the hundreds of nurses on the line.

However, they are being assisted by the Massachusetts Nurses Association and the trade unions, which are working to isolate the strike and starve workers out on the picket line. The MNA itself has sought to minimize the significance of Tenet's replacement of striking workers and has refused to mobilize its 23,000 members in protest. The Massachusetts AFL-CIO has made no call to its 400,000 membership to unite in defense of the jobs of St. Vincent nurses.

The trade union bureaucracy as a whole is assisting the MNA's isolation of the strike. UFCW Local 1445, which represents 600 support staff at Saint Vincent Hospital, came to an agreement with Tenet Healthcare

and called off a strike in which support staff would have joined nurses on the picket line.

After leaving them out for months without strike pay, the MNA is now pushing for nurses to concede their demands of 1:4 nurse to patient ratios on medical/surgical floors and telemetry units, as well as increased staffing in the emergency department and ancillary support in each unit.

The nurses responded with scorn and indignation at the latest offer in early May, which did nothing to address staffing ratios. The MNA gave them a preview of the offer via a Zoom call where nurses lashed out at the insulting offer, shouted expletives and "No, no!"

Clearly sensing that the union was in danger of losing control over the rank and file, high profile members of the Democratic Party and trade union apparatus were sent out to speak at a rally over the weekend which was organized by the MNA.

The rally was an amalgamation of Democratic Party politicians that run the state and the trade union bureaucracy, including former Democratic Party presidential candidate Senator Elizabeth Warren, Democratic US Congressman Jim McGovern, President of the Massachusetts AFL-CIO Scott Tolman, President of the Central Massachusetts AFL-CIO John Carlson, President of the Mass Building and Trades Council Frank Callahan and Sara Nelson, President of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA.

Roughly two hundred total were in attendance Saturday in the parking lot of the ad hoc strike headquarters of the MNA. Only a small delegation of 75-100 striking nurses were present among the politicians and union bureaucrats, their aides and hangers-on seeking selfies.

The cause of the low turnout from nurses was demonstrated in responses to a post on the MNA's Facebook page announcing the rally, which received 422 comments and was shared 551 times. Comments demonstrated skepticism and ambivalence towards the agenda of Democratic Party politicians and labor bureaucrats stumping for votes and federal legislation.

The most liked comment was "Sorry. Elizabeth Warren doesn't care about the nurses, nor does McGovern. Just looking for votes!" that received 100 'likes' and was echoed by another highly liked: "Some election must be around the corner for these fossils to come out of retirement on the job."

In another post reflecting the growing mistrust the union bureaucracies, distant from the conditions facing workers, stated, "You can't support the politicians or status quo Labor (so-called) 'leadership' that ever allowed conditions [to] deteriorate to the despicable state of our Healthcare today and then expect significant change. None of them have missed a meal, paycheck... or vacation home!"

The cynical slogan assumed by the MNA and the Democratic Party officials at the rally was "One day longer, One day stronger" as nurses are starved on the picket line and face the permanent loss of their jobs.

In reality, nurses need a new strategy, based on uniting their struggle with other working class struggles which are erupting throughout the country, driving workers into conflict with the corrupt trade unions. A strike by 3,000 truck manufacturing workers in Virginia employed by Volvo Group has entered its second week after workers twice overwhelmingly rejected a union-backed concessions contract. In Brookwood, Alabama more than 1,100 miners, who have been on strike since April 1, overwhelmingly rejected a sellout contract endorsed by the United Mine Workers, with some workers burning copies of the contract outside of the local union hall. Just south in Connecticut, SEIU Local 1199 has worked to prevent three strikes by nursing home workers fighting for the same issues of safe staffing and a living wage in the past month alone.

Worcester nurses have powerful allies. Health care workers represent the largest industry in the state of Massachusetts, with nearly three quarters of a million people in the industry in 2018, according to a Pioneer Institute study. According to the Census Bureau's 2019

American Community Survey, there are 22 million workers in the health care industry in the United States.

A real fight for patient safety and safe staffing cannot be confined to a single hospital or health care system. St. Vincent nurses must reach out to striking Volvo autoworkers in Virginia and coal miners in Alabama, as well as the millions of health care workers who also want to fight for patient safety and against the for-profit health care system. This must be done to halt the further isolation of their strike by the MNA, the Massachusetts AFL-CIO, and the entire trade union apparatus which is tied by a million threads to the Democratic Party and ruling class.

The only way for health care workers to break out of the straitjacket of the trade unions, the Democratic Party and the ruling class, is to build its own democratic organizations, rank-and-file committees, to demand at any and all costs the highest quality of care and working conditions for all health care workers and their patients. This committee must link up with the network of similar committees being established across the country and in countries throughout the world, in order to unite across industries, workplaces, and globally to carry out a coordinated fight in defense of the working class.



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