

Defend the Saint Vincent nurses in Worcester, Massachusetts!

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Workers around the world must come to the defense of 700 striking nurses at the Saint Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts, who are at risk of permanent job loss, months into a strike which the union has worked to isolate.

Since March, the nurses have been on the picket lines to demand a contract with improved nurse-to-patient ratios. In May, the Massachusetts Nurse Association (MNA) urged nurses to vote for a contract which did not fully address their demands for all units. Nurses vehemently rejected this deal.

Dallas-based health care conglomerate Tenet Healthcare Corp. is now making good on its threat of mass firings. After announcing plans to replace dozens of striking nurses, it has now announced that 184 nurses have begun working at Saint Vincent, including both permanent replacements and strikers who crossed the picket line. Tenet has been emboldened to escalate its attack because of the isolation of the Saint Vincent nurses by the MNA and the AFL-CIO.

The issues at stake on the Saint Vincent picket line are the same which all health care workers have faced throughout the pandemic. Across the country they have faced unimaginable horrors. They have run out of PPE, worked 16- to 20-hour shifts, experienced death on a numbing scale and held the hands of patients who have died without their family present.

Many health care workers are now suffering from symptoms of PTSD, anxiety and depression. The total number of health care worker COVID-19 deaths is unknown, but Kaiser Health News documented that in the first year of the pandemic over 3,600 health care workers have died. Some are on disability leave due to symptoms of long COVID or were laid off during the pandemic. With cancellations of lucrative elective surgeries and declines in Emergency Department and outpatient services, hospital systems have laid off over a million

health care workers, seeing them as a drain on their rapidly diminishing revenues.

From the beginning, COVID-19 has overwhelmed gutted public health programs and underfunded and unprepared hospital systems. During the first year of the pandemic, 20 rural hospitals closed, compared to 116 over the previous decade.

Health care “heroes” across the country have continued to work courageously, in spite of conditions, to diligently treat their patients with the materials and staffing available to them. While hospital networks have rewarded their sacrifices with pizza and five-dollar gift cards during “nurses week,” the collective wealth of the world’s billionaires exploded by more than 60 percent last year, from \$8 trillion to \$13.1 trillion. Major hospital systems, including Tenet, received billions from the bipartisan CARES Act, including more than \$1 billion in stimulus funds and a \$1.5 billion Medicare advance. Tenet CEO Ronald Rittenmeyer raked in \$16.7 million in 2020.

At the same time, the Biden administration, with the collaboration of right-wing Republicans, is moving to end all COVID-19 restrictions throughout the country. Today, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, who last year postured as an opponent of Trump’s murderous herd immunity policies, is ending all remaining lockdown measures in her state.

At least 600,000 Americans have already died of the virus. However, under conditions where the virus continues to rage throughout the world, and the new and deadly Delta variant of the disease continues to spread rapidly, the premature lifting of measures necessary to prevent the spread will make further surges in the United States all but inevitable, in spite of proclamations by the government and the media that the virus is “over.”

The Saint Vincent nurses are not just battling the corporations and the government, but they are also fighting the nurses union. The Massachusetts Nurse

Association (MNA) has isolated the strike, making no call for its 23,000 members to join the picket line. The Massachusetts AFL-CIO has also refused to mobilize its 400,000 members in defense of the nurses. Earlier in the strike, Saint Vincent's support workers were ready to join the nurses on strike but were quickly forced into an agreement with Tenet by UFCW Local 1445.

The MNA has also not provided a single dollar of strike pay, instead setting up a Venmo account through which workers can apply for minimal funds. Saint Vincent nurses have gone one-quarter of the year without pay.

This is not due to a lack of funds on the part of the unions. As the WSWS wrote in April, "According to a filing by the MNA with the US Department of Labor for the period covering July 2019 through June 2020, the union had assets of \$13,889,584 at the end of the reporting period. Union members' dues payments and nonunion workers' so-called agency fees accounted for \$21,236,682 of the union's \$22,667,948 total receipts. Regular union dues range from \$69 to \$89 a month for the MNA's more than 23,000 members. This means that nurses pay \$828 to \$1,068 annually for MNA "representation," yet are receiving no strike pay.

The withholding of strike pay and isolation of the strike on the union's part is a deliberate strategy to drive the nurses into submission. As with the unions throughout the country, including the UFCW, the United Auto Workers, the American Federation of Teachers and the United Mine Workers, the MNA functions as an agent of management, controlled not by workers but by bureaucrats whose privileges depend upon rising stock markets and close working relationships with the employers.

The mass firing of Saint Vincent nurses must be opposed. Powerful, collective action with support from broad sections of the working class is required to defend the nurses.

There is immense potential for Saint Vincent nurses to link up their struggles with those of health care workers around the country and the world. In Connecticut, just a two-hour drive south of Saint Vincent Hospital, Democratic Governor Ned Lamont threatened to call out the National Guard against a planned strike of over 2,000 nursing home workers until the SEIU called it off at the last minute.

In Denmark, a tenth of the country's nurses announced a plan last week to strike after nurses voted down a pay deal approved by their union leadership. In Israel, hundreds of doctors went on strike in early June, opposing Netanyahu's decision to cut funding to the health care

system and trigger mass layoffs. In Japan, nurses staged an online protest after the Suga government continued its plans to host the highly unpopular Tokyo Summer Olympic Games as hospitals overflow and run out of supplies.

Last week over 50,000 Sri Lankan healthcare workers went on a five hour strike over a range of demands and in opposition to President Rajapakse's recently declared strike ban criminalizing any industrial action. Under this ban, striking workers can be punished by harsh prison sentences and fines. Not a single trade union in Sri Lanka has opposed these repressive laws.

Throughout the world, workers are rising up against decades of stagnating wages and rising inequality. This is driving them into conflict with the trade unions, which have upheld and defended these conditions for decades. In the United States, the most important struggle taking place right now is by the 3,000 workers at the Volvo Trucks New River Valley Plant in Dublin, Virginia.

Throughout their strike, the UAW has undermined the workers at every turn, pushing through sellout contracts behind the backs of the workers, isolating their fight and starving the workers of their strike pay. Volvo workers are fighting back and have formed the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which is challenging the union's betrayals and fighting to link up Volvo workers with workers throughout the country.

Saint Vincent nurses must follow suit by organizing their own committee to oppose the MNA's isolation and link up with health care workers throughout the world. The WSWS and the International Committee of the Fourth International are assisting workers in building up a global network, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), to unite and coordinate the struggles of the working class throughout the world. These committees will do everything they can to assist Saint Vincent nurses in their struggle.

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