

Tenet intensifies effort to replace striking Saint Vincent nurses

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Hospital operator Tenet Healthcare has announced additional efforts to hire scab labor to replace 700 striking nurses at its Saint Vincent hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Tenet rejected a mediator's proposal that negotiations with the Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA) be taken to Washington D.C., saying it had issued its "last, best and final offer." According to the company, the offer includes increases to staffing without an actual defined patient ratio, an increase in resource nurses as well as an increase of wages from 8 percent to 35 percent between now and the end of the contract in 2024. The contract also incentivizes nurses to break the strike and return to work by offering a 3 percent lump sum bonus on hours worked in 2021.

The company, which had already announced that it had hired 100 replacement nurses for jobs posted in May, has now posted hundreds of additional job openings in an attempt to break the strike. A search on the job site indeed.com for "Strike worker replacement" lists 442 jobs with sign-on bonuses as high as \$10,000 for an Operating Room RN. The job posting states "No experience requirement for bonus!" The posting says the sign-on bonus "brings with it a 2 year employment commitment, and pays out quarterly over the first year of employment."

The MNA, however, sought to minimize the significance of this attack on the strike, claiming that the job postings were just "scare tactics." David Schildmeier, an MNA spokesman said the statement was, "just another attempt to intimidate the nurses ... all of this is just smoke and mirrors." He added, "The time for posturing is over, the time to really negotiate and reach an agreement to end the strike is here."

Dominique Muldoon, who is co-chair of the nurses' bargaining unit, also played down the threat, "All the

hospitals in the area are competing over nurses," Muldoon told WBUR. "If they were going to replace us, I think it would've happened back in May when they said they were going to replace us."

Tenet clearly thought that the strike would be over soon after the first round of job postings in May. That this didn't happen is entirely due to the stubborn resistance of nurses who rejected previous offers and continued to press for higher staffing ratios in the face of management threats and the complete isolation of their struggle by the MNA, and the state and national AFL-CIO. In May, a contract proposal brought to the nurses by the bargaining unit was shouted down in a Zoom call.

The public indifference to the threat to replace strikers with scabs is in line with the union's response since they were forced to call the strike on March 8, following an 89 percent vote to approve a strike the previous month.

The MNA has worked to isolate the Saint Vincent struggle from the beginning. The union has provided no strike pay to the 700 nurses. Instead, it set up a Venmo account through which workers can apply for minimal funds, paid for out of donations from the public, not from the union's assets of almost \$14 million. The withholding of strike pay and isolation of the strike by the union is a deliberate strategy to drive the nurses into submission. The isolation of the struggle is also being enforced by other health care unions, which have kept their members on the job at Tenet's 65 hospitals and over 450 health care facilities across the country.

Tenet is now cynically seeking to use the pandemic and the latest surge in hospitalizations due to the Delta variant to further pressure the nurses to end their strike. The health care conglomerate has no problem profiteering from a global pandemic. Tenet used the

\$2.8 billion it received from the CARES Act not to provide COVID care for patients, but to “maximize our cash position,” as Tenet CEO Ron Rittenmeyer told the *Dallas Morning News* in April 2020.

The company has posted a profit of \$414 million since the beginning of the pandemic, with more than \$97 million in profits for the first quarter of 2021. Tenet’s stock more than tripled from a low of \$21.76 per share at the start of the pandemic to a high of \$70.01 as of August 15, 2021.

A letter from five Saint Vincent department heads to Governor Charlie Baker on August 12 states:

“As we face yet another COVID-19 surge and overflowing hospital emergency rooms across the state, we are compelled to ask for your intervention in this public health crisis that is threatening the health and wellness of your constituents. ... We, physician leaders at St. Vincent Hospital, are speaking out and going on the record that the current strike led by the (Massachusetts Nurses Association union) is directly preventing our patients from accessing quality healthcare in Central Massachusetts during a global pandemic, and putting us all at risk.”

According to the *Worcester Telegraph*, “The letter identifies the signatories as “independent medical professionals in Central Massachusetts, not employed by St. Vincent Hospital.” All the signatories are in fact employed by Saint Vincent and two are on the board of the hospital.

The letter is signed by Dr. George M. Abraham, chief of medicine at the hospital who is also the treasurer of Saint Vincent; Dr. David Bader, chief of radiology and board member of the hospital; Dr. Michael Burns, chief of emergency medicine; Dr. Leon Josephs, chief of surgery and a board member at the hospital; and Dr. Michele Sinopoli, chief of obstetrics and gynecology at the hospital.

It is not clear what the Republican governor might do to end the strike, but the message is intended to bring more pressure upon the strikers, claiming that it is them, not Tenet, that is putting patients at risk.

While Saint Vincent bosses appeal for assistance to Baker, the MNA and the AFL-CIO have worked throughout the strike to sow illusions in various Democratic politicians, such as Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren or US Labor Secretary Marty Walsh, the former mayor of Boston. The Democrats, like their

union supporters, have done nothing to mobilize support for the strike.

The union’s response to the letter said, “the nurses are anxious to get back in the building as soon as possible to care for their patients and their community and are working with the federal mediator to move the process towards a resolution to end the strike.”

Outside of the broadening of the struggle to all health care workers and other sections of the working class, Tenet is not going to concede to the demands of the nurses and any agreement reached through federal mediation will be to the detriment of the strikers.

After six months of struggle, now confronting a very real threat to their jobs, it is urgent that Saint Vincent nurses draw the necessary conclusion from the union-enforced isolation and form rank-and-file committees to take up a struggle independent of the MNA and AFL-CIO bureaucracies.



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