

Massachusetts Nurses Association carries water for Pelosi as striking nurses face mass firings

Ben Oliver**17 September 2021**

Now the longest in the history of Massachusetts, the strike by nurses of St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester for safe staffing ratios, humane working conditions and better patient outcomes remains at an impasse. Although an agreement was on the table after secret negotiations in August, Tenet Healthcare of Dallas, Texas, which owns St. Vincent, refuses to reinstate striking nurses to their previous positions.

Instead of acceding to nurses' demands, the for-profit company has started firing the striking nurses en masse, hiring permanent replacements for veteran nurses. This behavior by the capitalist health care company is enabled by the bankrupt and corrupt labor union that ostensibly represents the nurses, the Massachusetts Nurses Association, along with the AFL-CIO.

Adrift on the picket line, nurses are expected to believe that a brief visit by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Worcester on a promotional tour for congressional legislation amounts to a reinforcement of their struggle. While the press has nothing to quote from Pelosi, MNA bargaining co-chair Michelle Pellegrino, who along with other members of the bargaining committee met briefly with Pelosi, attempted to cast the Democratic politician as their champion.

Pellegrino reports that Pelosi "was very appreciative of nurses and health care workers across the country, especially the St. Vincent nurses. She was well abreast of our situation. She understands that having a for-profit company like Tenet Healthcare in the game of healthcare is dangerous."

Pellegrino is attempting to further the lie that nurses' political hopes lie with the Democratic wing of the political establishment. The Biden administration

whistles a pro-labor tune with the intent of further entrenching the labor unions in the role of labor contractor and labor police. The bureaucrats return the favor by campaigning for Democrats, siphoning away member dues into political action committees.

The MNA and the AFL-CIO have isolated and strangled the nurses strike to the point that Tenet Healthcare has worked with impunity to replace long-time nurses with strikebreakers, risking patient safety—the very thing the nurses aim to ensure. St. Vincent Hospital CEO Carolyn Jackson baldly declared: "We have every [striking] nurse's position posted, and we will keep filling [them] until the strike is over or all the positions are filled."

The political alignment of the labor bureaucracy and the Democratic Party, and their fundamental agreement with the for-profit health care system in the US, are the only explanation for why a strike for safe staffing ratios in health care, an issue generalized among health care workers across the country and internationally, is being whittled down in a war of attrition.

Among statements that amount to little more than verbal finger wagging at Tenet, bargaining co-chair and MNA vice president Marie Ritacco admonishes the health care conglomerate, saying it has chosen to hire strikebreakers "purely out of spite."

Tenet Healthcare and the capitalist health care system at large are keenly aware of the significance of the St. Vincent strike as it pertains to a general labor shortage in health care and the growing class struggle. For years, nurses and other health care workers have been understaffed and overworked, struggling through burnout and moral injury. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and accelerated this process.

Fed up with bearing the burden of a regime that consistently risks patients' health, and having exhausted all other tactics, the St. Vincent nurses demanded safer staffing ratios by launching strike action in March.

Tenet Healthcare responded as only a capitalist enterprise can. Sanctioned by capitalist law, and enabled by the inaction of the labor bureaucracy, it has spent over \$100 million in strikebreaking efforts—an amount far surpassing what is necessary to meet nurses' demands—and now seeks to physically render the strike pointless by replacing the striking workers. To do otherwise would encourage health care workers everywhere, as well as the working class as a whole, to mobilize collectively in opposition to the life-threatening demands placed on it by the exploiting class.

If the MNA were to acknowledge the objective motivations of Tenet in defending its profits, it would be forced to reckon with its own role in isolating and starving the strike. Thus, the MNA bureaucrats rely on casting the actions of Tenet Healthcare in moral terms. To objectively describe the motives of Tenet Healthcare would lead workers to demand the requisite response: a qualitatively different struggle than the one being directed by the MNA.

The nurses of St. Vincent have been isolated since the beginning of their strike. Although they have been joined by various community organizations on the picket line and have occasionally enjoyed the company of supporters who offer food, song and messages of solidarity, not a single solidarity strike has been organized by the MNA or the AFL-CIO. This despite the fact that several of the bargaining units within the union of over 23,000 nurses are currently in the middle of protracted contract negotiations.

Striking nurses have selflessly forfeited over half a year's paychecks, having also been starved of financial means, forced to find per diem work and rely on charity as their dues do not contribute to a strike-pay fund per union bylaws, which union leaders are quick to claim MNA members have effectively accepted. The same union dues, however, find their way into the pockets of bureaucrats and union lawyers, as well as the war chests of the union's own political action committee which is active on state ballot measures and in Democratic Party politics.

The struggle by nurses at St. Vincent Hospital is demonstrative of an intractable reality: the fight by the working class for safe staffing in health care cannot be won under the aegis of the union or the Democratic Party. The COVID-19 pandemic has officially killed more than 662,000 people in the US and one in four hospitals are now reporting more than 95 percent of ICU beds occupied, up from one in five last month.

This disastrous situation at hospitals is a direct result of the policies of the Biden administration, supported by the unions, to corral children into classrooms so their parents can be forced into factories and other workplaces. In this context, the quip from Pelosi on her visit to the Rainbow Child Development preschool in Worcester takes on a sinister significance: "Children learning, parents earning—that's a good combination."

Just as the ruling class as a whole has placed the profits of the ruling elites above the lives of workers, the private health corporations have placed profits over the wellbeing of patients and staff. To secure safe working conditions for nurses and adequate patient care, a system of genuine socialized health care under the democratic control of the working class is a vital necessity.

Such a policy has been consistently opposed by the Democratic Party. The Obama/Biden administration removed a public option from Affordable Care Act, which upheld the for-profit health care system and funneled billions of dollars into the coffers of the private insurers, pharmaceutical companies and giant health care chains such as Tenet.

The urgent task posed to the striking nurses at St. Vincent is to form a rank-and-file committee entirely independent of the Massachusetts Nurses Association to expand the strike beyond the narrow confines of their bargaining unit and their union. Nurses must unite with other health care workers currently cordoned off by the unions, including UFCW 1445 and Teamsters 170 at St. Vincent Hospital, as well as SEIU 1199 throughout the Northeast.



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