

Retail pharmacy workers speaking out after nationwide walkout action to oppose unsafe working conditions

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Pharmacy workers across the United States held a nationwide walkout Monday to protest chronic understaffing, low pay and working conditions that endanger the safety of both employees and patients. The walkout, which focused on nonunion pharmacies at retailers such as CVS, Walgreens and Target, is an expression of seething anger among health care workers, who have been asked for two years to shoulder the burden of an unmanaged pandemic with few if any additional resources.

Key demands include an end to dangerously low staffing levels, a reduction in forced overtime, and higher wages, particularly for pharmacy technicians and clerks, who often make as little as \$15 an hour.

As of this writing, it is unknown how many total pharmacists, pharmacy technicians and pharmacy clerks walked off the job. The size of the strike movement, which has been largely blacked out in the capitalist press so far, is difficult to judge, as many workers have likely opted not to publicly announce their participation due to fear of retaliation from management. However, social media postings by pharmacists and other pharmacy workers make clear their deep determination to fight against intolerable conditions.

The hashtag #pizzaisnotworking has become a social media rallying cry for many pharmacy workers, denouncing token efforts such as free pizza used by management as a meaningless gesture to workers they force to remain on the job for inhuman hours at a breakneck pace of work.

Bled Marchall Tanoe, the pharmacist who started the #pizzaisnotworking hashtag, spoke to the WSW on the conditions facing pharmacists. Tanoe used to be a

retail pharmacist at Walgreens but left her job several months into the pandemic after years of stress and abuse.

Tanoe compared the job of pharmacists as akin to piloting an aircraft full of people, but due to lack of staffing and technicians to help, the pharmacist or pilot “is asked to serve drinks and take care of passengers while no one is running the plane and making sure medications are correct, doses, allergies etc.”

“There is no shortage of pharmacists, but people are refusing to work in dangerous working conditions with high medical errors,” she said. “There is a refusal to work in an environment that is detrimental to pharmacists and patients.

“It is a very dangerous situation that people don’t realize. It’s not just putting medicine in bottles; someone has to check you don’t have an allergy, correct medication, the duration and everything are correct.” She described how there have been many instances in which exhaustion by pharmacists leads to situations where “People get the flu vaccine instead of the COVID vaccine, or the wrong vaccine entirely.”

Many of the most outspoken supporters of the strike are former retail pharmacists, who no longer face the threat of termination for speaking out.

Portia, a former retail pharmacist, posted a screenshot from a recent article on the *World Socialist Web Site* about a pharmacist who died of a heart attack after being threatened by management if he left his shift to seek treatment. The article has gone viral and has been read tens of thousands of times. “To my retail pharmacist friends struggling to take care of yourself, your patients, your sanity... Tomorrow some pharmacists in retail will finally do what should have

been done years ago and walk out... I left because I feared this is what would have happened to me ... the profession we went into to help people is literally killing us. Something has to change!”

Andrea, another former pharmacist, explained what is at stake: “Retail pharmacy needs to change. It’s the only profession where you earn a doctorate degree and are treated like garbage. We went to school for 6+ years, are medical professionals, and the corporations we work for only care about profits and numbers... We help the uninsured or underinsured, the patients who otherwise do not have access to health care... [N]ot many people see the value in what we do and how many people we help, especially the employers. It’s such a shame. I remember being terrified to call out of work or asking to leave early for legitimate medical reasons. I got in a car accident once and the first person I called was my Walgreens district manager to let them know I wasn’t going to be able to come in. It was at that point I realized I had to make a change.”

“After 23 years, I left pharmacy and it was the best decision I ever made,” explained Sandra. “I was heartbroken and felt like I lost my identity, but it was the right thing to do. The job was slowly killing me physically and emotionally. My heart goes out to the people still in the business.”

Amy, another former retail pharmacist, voiced her support for the strike. “My last year working full time at a chain, I passed out about 10 hours into an 11.5-hour shift (only one 30-minute break). I still finished my shift once I came to. All of this and I didn’t even work for one of the two big bad wolves in our profession. On December 20th there is a nationwide walkout planned. Please consider supporting this movement by planning your prescription needs ahead of time so that you do not need to give these places your business on that day, and so you don’t have to worry about running out and not being able to be helped if places are (even more) short-staffed.”

Kelley, a former pharmacy technician, said, “I’m so upset that after 3 years as a certified pharmacy technician, I wasn’t being paid enough and I had to leave the profession. I now make more stocking shelves at Walmart than I did as a healthcare worker in a hospital during the height of the COVID pandemic.”

Pharmacy workers have taken important steps in organizing a nationwide strike. However, more than

militancy is required to win this fight. Retail pharmacy workers must follow the example of the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee and form democratically controlled rank-and-file committees to carry the struggle forward. Unlike the pro-corporate trade unions, which have betrayed one struggle after another, these committees do not begin with what management is willing to give but what workers need, and to fight for these demands, and seek to unite the struggles of workers across the world.

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