

“They’re literally making us sick”: Pharmacy workers describe conditions that sparked US walkouts

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Retail pharmacy workers conducted a nationwide walkout on Monday in the US, organized on social media, to protest worsening work conditions at large retail chains such as CVS, Walgreens and Walmart. As the hyper-infectious Omicron variant continues to spread throughout the country, this much overlooked section of the health care industry is making its own demands for better working conditions, including patient safety, and an overdue increase in wages.

One pharmacist who requested to remain anonymous told the WSWS, “We work 12 hour shifts without technicians, we have no breaks and no lunch break as the drive-thru has to be open. We have not had a raise in four years.” He emphasized the need for pharmacy technicians who “help take care of customers and type and count prescriptions, so if there is no tech, then the pharmacist has to try and do everything all while filling prescriptions accurately and giving COVID vaccinations.”

He said the job “gave me so much stress that I developed heart arrhythmia and had to be on meds. They’re literally making us sick.”

Even before the pandemic began, these workers already faced chronic understaffing and low pay, circumstances that were only made worse during the pandemic.

Bled Tanoe, the pharmacist who started the popular #pizzaisnotworking hashtag and Facebook group, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* on the conditions facing pharmacists. “There is no shortage of pharmacists,” she said, “but people are refusing to work in dangerous working conditions with high medical errors. There is a refusal to work in an environment that is detrimental to pharmacists and

patients.”

Tanoe used to be a retail pharmacist at Walgreens, but she left her job after numerous years of stress and abuse in the opening months of the pandemic. She described the mental, physical and emotional stress on pharmacists who are leaving the profession in droves. “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 that there have been many instances where patients “get flu vaccine instead of COVID vaccine, or even the wrong vaccine entirely.”

Tanoe described the multiple responsibilities piled on pharmacists as similar to a pilot on a plane being “asked to serve drinks and take care of passengers while no one is running the plane.” Pharmacists have to “make sure medications are correct, in the right doses, make sure there are no issues with allergies, etc.”

The number of pharmacists nationwide who took part in the walkouts is not yet clear, but Tanoe noted that where pharmacy staff have not walked out, it was due to fear of retaliation by their employers, “not because they don’t want to.”

Such accounts are not uncommon. One worker on Twitter responded to a tweet by CVS Health’s CEO, Karen Lynch, about the massive profits the company made in its third quarter, “Karen I’ve been a worker at CVS for 6 straight years. You all can report HUGE earnings but WON’T pass those earnings on to us techs who work SOLO 40+ hours a week and develop medical problems because of being overworked without ‘enough hours’ to hire more people. Help US instead.”

In September, a pharmacist died of a heart attack on

the floor of a CVS pharmacy after being told by a supervisor that she could not leave until another pharmacist arrived to relieve her two hours later. The hashtag #SheWaited has been used to bring attention to this senseless tragedy.

Such crippling conditions can contribute to pharmacists and pharmacy techs making dangerous errors while filling prescriptions. This led one pharmacist to write to the Texas Board of Pharmacy in April 2020: “I am a danger to the public working for CVS.” In December 2018, an 85-year-old Florida woman died after two weeks when she was accidentally given a strong chemotherapy drug instead of her usual medication.

Dr. Shane Jerominski, the southern California pharmacist who first issued the call for Monday's walkouts, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*. “I tried to organize this as a show of solidarity, because we are working in unsafe environments and something has to give.

“It’s hard to say how many walked out.” explained Jerominski, “In the Palm Springs market, there were five stores closed. They have about 23 locations. They’re all understaffed.

“A lot of technicians could get behind it. They felt that if they didn’t show up that day, they can still operate. If the pharmacist doesn’t show up, the pharmacy can’t operate. Many pharmacists felt they couldn’t do that to their patients.”

Highlighting the brutal conditions facing pharmacy technicians, Jerominski noted, “In the Palm Springs market, it’s a cyclical market. Some technicians would be guaranteed 40 hours a week and then get flexed out in the summer.”

Jerominski explained his personal motivation for fighting to organize pharmacy workers. In March of 2021, Jerominski and his wife, Marylin, began warning about the stresses that the coronavirus vaccination campaign would place on already overburdened pharmacists without additional support. “My wife and I were featured at NBC with Lester Holt. She’s working at one of the busiest Walgreens in the area and now we’re expected to vaccinate everybody. They started with one every 15 minutes, then three every 15 minutes, and they still had to fill all the regular prescriptions.

“We thought they were going to fire her for talking to

the media. Corporate basically promised her the world, said she would get extra help, but never delivered. They are making it very difficult for her to try to get her to quit. They don’t want to fire her. The media asked us to let them know if they fired her.”

Jerominski’s outspoken fight for the rights of pharmacy workers may have already resulted in retaliation against his independent pharmacy in Brawley, California. “I wanted to participate, I wanted my entire store closed. I had every intention of not being open as well on Monday at my location. On Friday—we’re open Monday through Friday—I opened the pharmacy and the second patient was an inspector from the board of pharmacy who had received an anonymous complaint to inspect the pharmacy. Now I have to submit a lot of paperwork by December 24 to keep my license and I had to work through the strike.

“I’ve been a pharmacist for 15 years and I’ve never seen a Board of Pharmacy inspection until I started working for an independent. The first time was about four and a half years ago, about three months after I started working here. That inspection first was due to issues with the prior pharmacist.”

Although it is unknown who filed this anonymous complaint, the timing is highly suspect. “Sitting on the California Board of Pharmacy are many middle-level managers of pharmacy chains,” noted Jerominski, “I think I made someone irritated.”

Jerominski remains determined to organize pharmacy workers for better conditions. “Pharmacists do have more power than they know. You can’t have the pharmacy open without them.”



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