

Workers around the world come to the defense of former Tennessee nurse RaDonda Vaught

Our reporters
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The WSWS is organizing the working class to defend former Vanderbilt nurse RaDonda Vaught and all health care workers against victimization for the crisis of the for-profit health care system.

There has been a tremendous outpouring of support from nurses and other health care workers from around the world for Vaught, who was convicted for a medical error which led to the death of her patient. Here we publish statements of support from Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

Send in your statement by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. Sign up for our Health Care Workers Newsletter for the latest on this struggle and others like it.

Gary, a doctor in a major public hospital in Brisbane, Queensland: I am writing to register my opposition to the persecution of RaDonda Vaught. From the facts of the case, an honest and diligent nurse is being scapegoated for failures of organisation and leadership by her employer, Vanderbilt Medical Center.

Mistakes take place in health care, are made by nearly all health workers, very rarely reflect malicious intent, and place a heavy burden upon the conscience and personal lives of the workers.

In this case, as in so many others, a failure to have effective error checking systems and inadequate staffing made such a mistake far more likely. To punish the individual, but not the institution responsible for such a hazardous environment, is a travesty of justice.

Health workers in the US and around the world have endured much, especially thanks to the failure of governments in the last two years. RaDonda Vaught should not go to prison, but those who made her mistake inevitable, should.

John, doctor in a major hospital in Newcastle, Australia: Health care workers globally are under significant pressures that have intensified from the pandemic. Exhausted and frustrated, their work pressures are now heightened from the defiance of a scientific approach to end the pandemic, disposed of in preference to a “let it rip” policy of mass infection and death. These increasing pressures will lead to similar tragedies.

RaDonda Vaught’s case is yet another example of where the for-profit health care system, responsible for these deteriorating conditions, will be defended at all costs in the name of profit. And when something goes wrong, it will be the worker who is scapegoated to pay for the error. Vaught is innocent, has been unjustly treated and needs to be defended against this prosecution by all workers, as well as nurses and health care workers not just in the United States but internationally.

Steve, Melbourne, Australia: I’ve spent 37 years working as an aged and acute care nurse. It’s clear that RaDonda Vaught has been scapegoated by Vanderbilt University Medical Center and the legal system.

Both have worked to defend Vanderbilt’s profits and to transfer Vanderbilt’s responsibility for the death of Charlene Murphey onto nurse Vaught. The Center has throughout sought to falsify documentation, cover up the cause of death, lie to the victim’s family and then extort silence conditional on payment of compensation.

Patients and medical workers are the inevitable victims in a system that creates the conditions for all sorts of mistakes and inefficiencies. Vanderbilt’s computer system and the drug dispensing program had no failsafe.

In nurses being scapegoated for systemic problems, nothing much has changed in the decades since I began nursing.

The response of the hospital needs to be examined—they

put in place systems where they knew there were likely to be consequences and that actually worsened the problem.

Where are the nursing unions in the case of this victimised nurse? She has been left high and dry to take the punishment for a problem that is far deeper than her individual mistake.

Anne, a nurse: I have been a nurse for five years. It is quite possible to make such a mistake, a similar one happened where I work last year, with the patient passed away as a result. The mistake was made with medication by a nurse on her first day, where two patients had the same name.

The punishment to RaDonda Vaught is not fair. The hospital also has to take responsibility—they were aware what happened. She made an honest mistake, but the hospital didn't help her.

It is unfair, why put her in prison?

Tim, a health worker: After reviewing the circumstances leading up to the tragic death of 75-year-old Vanderbilt patient, Charlene Murphey, I call for the reversal of the guilty verdict against nurse RaDonda Vaught. Vaught should be given every support to return to nursing if she chooses to do so. Instead, I call for Vanderbilt to be investigated for the breaches of duty of care for its patients and staff.

Why was the dispensing of deadly medication allowed without another qualified nurse double-checking the medication order?

What procedures were put in place to check that the medication issued matched the patient if the ID scanner became inoperable? Was nurse Vaught given another option?

Anyone working in health care understands the pressure that is placed on us to care and see as many patients as possible. This daily pressure is even more pronounced with the COVID pandemic. Shortages of staff have become common across all health industries. The lack of staff has created higher workloads for all remaining staff. Under this pressure, a working policy and procedure protocol becomes critical. Vanderbilt has failed in its duty of care while nurse Vaught became a link in a tragedy that is rooted in the policy and procedure failure of her employer. Nurse Vaught has been made the scapegoat for this tragedy.

Sue, New South Wales, Australia: There are some serious flaws in the US medical system that allows this to happen. This is wrong and should not be accepted—scapegoating at its best! I was planning a working trip of the USA, now that's a big no from me.

The world is watching, do the right thing!

Kathryn, a nurse in Sydney, Australia: It is crystal clear that Tennessee nurse RaDonda Vaught has acted in the most principled way, right from the outset, as soon as she realised that an error had been made. Which demonstrates she takes her job, and the safety of the patients in her care, with the utmost seriousness—taking steps to report the incident immediately she became aware that the medication she, due to a series of system failures and understaffing pressures, had inadvertently administered to her patient Charlene Murphey and that had ultimately caused Mrs. Murphey's death.

Her employer, Vanderbilt University Medical Center VUMC did not act in such a manner, failing to report the event to the state, as required.

Yet it is nurse RaDonda Vaught alone who has been arrested, had her nursing licence revoked, charged, faced trial and faces the possibility of jail time for a mistake she made due to conditions of criminal underfunding and understaffing, including malfunctioning equipment by her employer, who has not been held to account legally in any way in this matter.

It is they who should be on trial, for failing in their duty of care, to both their employee and their patient. As a nurse myself, I unreservedly send my message of total support to RaDonda, who absolutely does not deserve any of this.

In solidarity and the knowledge that these potentially dangerous conditions face all health workers internationally.

Bron, Wellington, New Zealand: The more I read about this the sadder and angrier I feel. RaDonda you are not alone. Your honesty and courage is remarkable. Each one of us as nurses has stood in your shoes but you have taken a leap of professionalism few of us dared to. Kia Kaha (be strong). New Zealand.

Susan, Canada: She did the right thing and by the book but is being punished for being honest.



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