Suspend the sentence of Tennessee nurse RaDonda Vaught! No jail time, fines or penalties!

Socialist Equality Party (US)
10 May 2022

Attend the online meeting Sunday, May 15: "The defense of RaDonda Vaught and the fight facing health care workers"

On Friday morning, former Vanderbilt University Medical Center (VUMC) nurse RaDonda Vaught will be sentenced in a Tennessee courtroom after being unjustly convicted for a medical error. Vaught faces up to eight years in prison in the case, which would set a new and chilling precedent of sending health care workers to jail for the unsafe practices that exist throughout the health care industry.

Nurses and health care workers around the US and the world have rallied to the defense of Vaught because they know the real causes of tragic medical errors are chronic understaffing, inhuman workloads and the subordination of medical care to corporate profit.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for workers to demand that Judge Jennifer L. Smith of the Davidson County Criminal Court suspend the sentence of Vaught and release her with no jail time, fines or conditions. Workers must further demand the restoration of her nursing license and her immediate reinstatement at VUMC with full back pay and restitution.

From day one, Vaught admitted the mistake she made in dispensing the wrong medication to Charlene Murphey, who tragically died on December 27, 2017. Hospital management, however, misled the state's medical examiner about the details of Murphey's death and sought to cover up their lack of safeguards. Vanderbilt University quickly settled with the family for $750,000 with the stipulation that they were not to speak publicly on the matter.

Approximately 10 months later, an anonymous tip to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) led to an investigation. It concluded that VUMC had failed to "mitigate risks associated with medication errors," which placed patients "in *immediate jeopardy* and risk of serious injuries and/or death."

But the hospital's politically connected executives were never held accountable. Instead, Nashville District Attorney Glenn Funk, who is a professor at Vanderbilt, brought charges against Vaught to protect the reputation and profit interests of the university and medical center. During the trial, the district attorney explicitly said he would not examine the hospital's "system failures" and falsely portrayed Vaught as "someone who considered her patient a disposable person."

On March 25, a jury convicted Vaught on charges of criminally negligent homicide and impaired adult abuse. Despite the outpouring of support for Vaught, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee has declared that he will not consider clemency for her.

Vaught is being scapegoated for precisely the "system failures" that exist at Vanderbilt and medical facilities across the country. Because of short staffing and other deficiencies, medical errors, including dispensing the wrong medicine, are frequent. The best estimates are that between 7,000 to 10,000 fatal medication errors occur every year.

To target nurses, who have dedicated themselves to saving lives, for errors produced by the health care system is an abomination. If such conduct is criminalized, moreover, the exodus of nurses from the profession, already at record levels because of the pandemic, will be even greater. The reporting of such mistakes, which is the only way to address real problems, will become rare given the potential for criminal prosecution.

Medical safety expert Professor Bruce Lambert of Northwestern University denounced Vaught's conviction as an "unjust verdict" and said, "This focus on individual

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fault, on shame, blame, and train, on punishment, instead of focusing on a just culture, system redesign, and making the safe thing the easiest thing to do—this kind of distorted focus is what makes health care dangerous."

But under a medical system in the grip of giant hospital chains, insurance companies, pharmaceutical and medical equipment monopolies, any effort to establish a rational "system redesign" or "just culture" runs up against the insatiable drive for corporate profit.

The outpouring of support for Vaught is an expression of growing anger and opposition among health care workers. For two-and-a-half years, nurses and other health care workers, already overworked and understaffed, have labored under the catastrophic conditions produced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The decision by the representatives of the American ruling class, Democrat and Republican, to reject the necessary public health measures to stop the transmission of the virus led to repeated waves of mass infection, flooding hospitals with patients and straining the entire health care system to the breaking point.

The deaths of more than 1 million people in the United States are not only a tragedy for the friends, family and co-workers of those who have perished. Nurses and health care workers have been on the frontlines. They have witnessed suffering on a mass scale without the support needed to survive themselves.

Health care workers have been forced to risk their lives in overflowing hospitals and long-term facilities without sufficient PPE. At least 3,600 frontline medical workers in the US died in the first year of the pandemic alone. In a measure of the real attitude of the corporate establishment to those they occasionally refer to as "health care heroes," no accurate count exists of the full death toll.

Congress handed billions in pandemic relief money to HCA Healthcare, Tenet Healthcare and the other hospital corporations, which promptly laid off thousands of workers. Since then, health care staff have been worked to the bone, and hundreds of thousands are leaving the profession due to burnout. An increasing number of nurses, many of whom are suffering from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), have tragically taken their own lives.

The claim that there is no money to vastly improve the health care infrastructure is a lie. Over the past two years, the wealth of US billionaires grew by more than 70 percent, to more than $5 trillion. The Biden administration and the Democrats and Republicans in Congress can find $1 trillion every year to expand the military and the instruments of death, but there are supposedly no resources for saving lives.

Throughout all of this, the corporatist trade unions, politically aligned with the Democratic Party, stood by. The unions took no measures to protect the lives of nurses during the pandemic; they have sabotaged every strike and struggle that has erupted; and they have done nothing to mobilize the strength of all health care workers to defend Vaught.

Medical errors can be prevented if the necessary resources are allocated to hire enough staff and deploy the most advanced technologies to assist health care workers. But this requires a frontal assault on the for-profit medical system and the fight for a system of socialist medicine, which guarantees high-quality health care to all as a social right, along with good wages and conditions for health care workers.

The persecution of RaDonda Vaught cannot stand! The old adage, "An injury to one is an injury to all!" has never been truer. The powerful display of support for Vaught must be organized and developed into a movement of nurses, organized through an independent network of rank-and-file committees, to demand better staffing, wage increases, mental health services, a massive infusion of funds into the health care system and an end to the subordination of health care to profit.

Suspend the sentence of RaDonda Vaught! No jail time, penalties or conditions! Restore her nursing license!

Stop the victimization of nurses! End the subordination of health care to profit!

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The WSWS urges nurses and other workers to send in your statement of support using the form below.

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