

Mass mobilization of nurses keeps RaDonda Vaught out of jail, but the battle must continue!

WSWS Health Care Workers Newsletter
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On Sunday, May 15, at 2 p.m. EDT, the WSWs Health Care Workers Newsletter is holding an online meeting on the defense of RaDonda Vaught and the fight against for-profit medicine. To register, click here.

On Friday, former Vanderbilt University Medical Center (VUMC) nurse RaDonda Vaught was sentenced to three years probation, with no jail time, for a medical error that led to the tragic death of one of her patients, Charlene Murphey, in 2017.

The decision not to sentence Vaught to jail was greeted with cheers from nurses who gathered outside the courthouse. Nurses throughout the country are relieved that Judge Jennifer L. Smith rejected the vindictive demands of the state prosecution for up to eight years in prison.

At the same time, the prosecution and conviction of Vaught sets a dangerous precedent for the criminalization of medical errors. Vaught faces three years of intrusive probation, has not had her nursing license restored, and has suffered enormous personal and emotional consequences from the unjust prosecution, while still bearing the weight of the error itself and the life that was lost.

As one nurse told the *WSWS Health Care Workers Newsletter* after the sentencing, “We all know that what the judge should have said was, ‘We’re sorry RaDonda. Here’s your medical license back. Now learn from your mistake and be a great nurse. We need nurses now more than ever.’”

Nurses should demand that her conviction be overturned. Vaught should be pardoned and given the opportunity to return to her profession as a nurse if she so chooses.

A number of facts arise out of the case of Vaught and the outcome of her sentencing.

First, there is no doubt that had it not been for the massive mobilization of support for Vaught among nurses and other health care workers, she would be presently behind bars. Smith began the hearing Friday morning by noting that the court had been flooded with emails, voicemails and letters on behalf of Vaught. Hundreds of thousands of nurses signed a petition demanding her freedom.

It was out of fear of a social explosion that the court made the decision not to put Vaught in prison.

Second, the character of the prosecution in the case, and the decision to charge Vaught in the first place, demonstrates the attitude of the capitalist state to workers. 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” that led to the mistake and falsely portrayed Vaught as “someone who considered her patient a disposable person.”

During the sentencing hearing, the prosecution, unsatisfied with stripping Vaught of her nursing license and dragging her through the courts, attempted to smear her character. It sought to enlist the family members of Charlene Murphey to argue for a harsh sentence, but both Murphey’s son, Michael, and her daughter-in-law, Chandra, testified that Charlene Murphy would not have wanted to see RaDonda Vaught thrown in jail.

The prosecution then brought up a charge that Vaught made lying statements on a gun license application, a thoroughly scurrilous smear. They asked for an “enhancement” on a sentence of three to six years by claiming that she had abused her position of public and private trust. The prosecution even sought to present

Vaught as a self-serving attention-seeker.

Third, all the underlying issues behind this case remain. Vaught has been scapegoated for the consequences of chronic understaffing and the “system failures” that exist in hospitals throughout the country.

The entire medical system is under the grip of giant hospital chains, insurance companies and pharmaceutical and medical equipment monopolies that operate on the basis of profit, not the needs of patients and health care workers.

As one nurse told the *Health Care Workers Newsletter* outside the Tennessee courtroom, “We need to stop the subordination of health care to profit because it’s killing our society, driving our society into the ground. It’s not just one political party, it’s the system as a whole.” Another said, “When you treat health care like a business and the goal is for profits, you sacrifice patient safety.”

Beyond the profit-driven character of the health care system itself, nurses and health care workers confront a social and political order that is entirely subordinated to the profit interests of a corporate and financial oligarchy.

This has been graphically demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. From the beginning of the pandemic, the ruling class and its representatives, Democrat and Republican, made the decision not to take the necessary and well-known public health measures—including the shutdown of non-essential production and schools, mass testing and contact tracing—that could have stopped transmission and eradicated the virus.

As a result, more than one million people are now dead in the United States. The pandemic has had a catastrophic impact on all of society, and in particular on the health care system. For two-and-a-half years, nurses and other health care workers—overworked, understaffed and without proper personal protective equipment—have labored under truly horrific conditions. Many have contracted COVID-19 and died. Many more have endured the psychological and emotional burden of witnessing death on a truly massive scale.

Now, the Biden administration has proclaimed the pandemic over, even as the virus continues to spread, infect and evolve into new strains. Democrats and Republicans can find hundreds of billions at the drop of a hat to fund the US war machine—the apparatus of death and destruction—but even the most minimal spending for health care to deal with the pandemic and save lives gets scrapped.

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 did nothing to mobilize the strength of all health care workers to defend Vaught.

Nurses throughout the country should be proud of their display of solidarity behind RaDonna Vaught. However, this is only the beginning.

The fight against the victimization of Vaught must be developed through the establishment of a network of rank-and-file organizations—organizations controlled by nurses, independent of the pro-corporate trade unions. The mobilization behind Vaught demonstrated that nurses do not need to rely on these organizations, which smother every effort of nurses to fight back.

A network of rank-and-file committees, comprised of nurses and other health care workers in every hospital and health care facility, will coordinate a serious fight for safe 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 private profit.

Such a struggle will win enormous support in the working class, in the US and throughout the world. The massive mobilization to demand Vaught’s freedom is part of a wave of social and class struggles, including by health care workers, internationally, driven by extreme social inequality, soaring inflation, the consequences of the pandemic and the looming danger of a third world war.

The fight must go forward! On Sunday, May 15, at 2 p.m. EDT, the *WSWS Health Care Workers Newsletter* is holding an online meeting to discuss the strategy and perspective upon which this fight must be based. We urge all health care workers to register and attend.



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