

Texas travel nurse on the health care crisis: “The profits are going to the CEOs instead of trying to keep nurses and support staff”

Zac Thorton
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This interview was conducted prior to the sentencing of former Tennessee nurse RaDonda Vaught. On Friday, Vaught was sentenced to three years probation. While the massive outpouring of support for Vaught from nurses succeeded in preventing her from going to jail, the precedent involved in her conviction remains. See, “Mass mobilization of nurses keeps Vaught out of jail, but the battle must continue!”

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with a travel nurse currently based in Texas who described her experiences with the pandemic as well her thoughts on the conviction and scapegoating of former Vanderbilt nurse RaDonda Vaught. Vaught was convicted of homicide for a medical error that led to the death of one of her patients.

Nurses have been operating on the front lines throughout the pandemic, facing wave after wave of mass infection and death. This in turn has exacerbated the issues confronting health care workers, including overwork and burnout, PTSD, and suicidal ideations and actions.

The nurse, who wishes to remain anonymous, began her career in 2017. “I worked on a medical surgical telemetry unit for the first three years of my career, and then at the beginning of the pandemic I started travel nursing. I’ve worked at about four different hospitals as a contract nurse since the pandemic started.

“Conditions at the hospital changed once the pandemic started, especially for me because I was working on a COVID unit directly with COVID patients. Some of the units in the hospital didn’t have COVID patients even though we were going through a pandemic.

“Before the pandemic, we were a little bit short

staffed, but overall staffing wasn’t an issue. Our ratio was four patients to one nurse, which is evidence-based practice, the safest amount we should be taking on a medical surgical unit. However, a lot of hospitals have a one to five safety ratio.

“After the pandemic, there was a shortage [in staff], which I experienced personally and continue to experience. As a result, we’ve had to go up to six or seven patients sometimes, and oftentimes without a free charge. We’re supposed to have a charge nurse that doesn’t have any patients so she can look out for the whole unit. They were giving that nurse four to six patients as well. For the whole unit we should have two nursing assistants, and we’ve gone sometimes without them, or sometimes with just one, which increases the number of tasks for nurses.”

Asked if she thought hospitals were more prepared now for another pandemic, she said, “I don’t think so. In addition to the nursing shortage, a lot of the resources just aren’t there. I think they do an okay job at the hospital I work at currently as far as supplying PPE, but at the beginning of the pandemic we were having to use the same equipment, sometimes for an entire week. That being said, there is still a shortage of resources, and a lot of tasks end up falling on the nurse. I think if another pandemic happened again we wouldn’t be prepared.

“I would say probably about half the time I’m at work I’m working with all new faces. The unit I work at is all travel agencies or contract nurses with staffing agencies, so it’s not like hospital employees. I’m currently back at the hospital I worked at before the pandemic, and almost all of the nurses I started with in 2017 are gone.

“Hospitals have such a demand and such a need for nurses and supportive staff, and I think capitalism does have a lot to do with it because most of the profits are going to the CEOs instead of trying to keep nurses and support staff.”

The recent suicide of a nurse in California has underscored the severe mental health crisis, exacerbated by the pandemic, that nurses and other health care workers are confronting. Speaking to this, she said, “It’s very sad. Nursing definitely takes a toll on our mental health. Some hospitals do have counseling available, but it takes time to get an appointment or then to get insurance approval.

“There’s a lot of hoops to go through to finally get seen preventatively. Unfortunately, by the time people get care they’re already in a crisis. Mental health care in general in the US has a lack of providers and resources.

“These issues have been here before the pandemic, and since the pandemic it’s only exacerbated the problem of overworking health care staff and the lack of attention to our mental health. Nurses share these tragic experiences with their patients on a typical workday; it’s only right to assume that it’s going to have a negative effect on our mental health as well.”

The recent conviction of former Vanderbilt nurse RaDonda Vaught has served as a clarion call for health care workers across the US. Vaught was convicted on March 25 of charges of criminally negligent homicide and impaired adult abuse after accidentally administering the wrong medication to a patient.

“It’s very disappointing and discouraging as a nurse the way she’s been portrayed, the way she’s been prosecuted, especially after everything nurses have done during the pandemic.

“People have very high expectations for us, calling us ‘heroes’ and ‘angels,’ but really, we’re just humans, and we’re doing the best that we can. When you overtask us, like the way [RaDonda] was being overtasked, mistakes are going to be made. It feels very unsafe. Nursing is becoming more and more unsafe, especially now that we can potentially go to prison for making a mistake at our job.

“I know they encouraged overriding medications. It sounded like a very unsafe environment to be working in. Nursing should be a just field to work in and a non-punitive environment to work in. We’re already under

enough stress. We should be able to talk about our mistakes to prevent them from happening again.

“I’ve heard that they’ve put an extra warning [on the medication dispensing unit], which makes me think, ‘Why wasn’t there always a warning?’ They should have always had a warning; this is a paralytic drug. I think the hospital was being neglectful, and not using the proper systems or fixing the systems that were in place.”



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