

Dangerous air conditioning issues remain New Jersey's Saint Michael's Hospital in aftermath of deadly heatwave

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When temperatures inside the facility rose to almost 100 degrees Fahrenheit, Saint Michael's Medical Center in Newark, New Jersey, was forced to transfer 12 patients out of intensive care. The patients were moved to Saint Mary's General Hospital, in Passaic (a sister hospital to Saint Michael's) on August 4.

The indoor temperature at Saint Michael's rose after an air conditioning unit stopped working. Both Saint Michael's and Saint Mary's are owned by the California-based company Prime Healthcare. As of this writing, the patients have been transferred back to Saint Michael's.

Excessive heat poses a serious risk to patients, many of whom are already vulnerable, as well as to workers. On the day after the patients were transferred, hospital spokesman Bruno Tedeschi played down the enormity of the crisis and shifted the blame for the malfunctioning of the chiller unit to the weather. "Certain parts of the hospital heated up, because we're in the middle of a heat wave," he told NJ Advance Media. Saint Michael's hospital management was most likely scrambling to hide the deplorable safety conditions caused by faulty air conditioning, as well as the fact that they had no emergency response in place for heat waves.

New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) inspectors recorded temperatures of 99.5 degrees Fahrenheit in the emergency room waiting area, 99.1 degrees in the triage area and 98.7 degrees in exam rooms.

According to state guidelines and industry standards, temperatures inside hospital patient rooms, the emergency department, the intensive care unit and the cardiac care unit must be between 70 and 75 degrees. Operating rooms must be between 68 degrees and 75 degrees.

NJDOH ordered ambulances to be diverted from the hospital beginning on Monday August 8, because the hospital's efforts to repair the air conditioning failed to

bring the temperatures to safe levels in the affected areas of the hospital.

Hospital management sent home 150 employees working in several departments affected by the heat. Workers were told that they would not be paid for days missed. This action compounded the problem of understaffing at Saint Michael's. As of June, the hospital staff was already short 42 registered nurses and 17 technicians.

"I think they are still using the chillers outside," a nurse working in the catheter lab told the *World Socialist Web Site* last week. "I didn't work in the cath[eter] lab last week. They told us to not come 'cause the heat was so bad. It's the area where we do heart procedures, also radiology procedures. They said it was in the 90s in the labs. It must have been very hard to work in that heat."

A New York City nurse commented on the situation to the WSW. "I've worked as a nurse in various positions in hospitals for over 35 years," the nurse said. "Being inside a hospital caring for patients in 90+ degree heat is traumatic for patients as well as staff. Discomfort for patients turns to irritability, patients profusely sweating, words of panic, statements like 'I'm going to die in here!' All the while we are sweating, our hearts are racing, because we know the dangers and damage that can occur—quickly!"

Saint Michael's is not the only for-profit hospital in New Jersey where serious violations of safety regulations with regard to heat have occurred this summer. On July 27, state officials cited CareWell Health, which previously was known as East Orange General Hospital, for violating temperature regulations throughout the facility. In some patient rooms, the temperature exceeded 80 degrees Fahrenheit.

Nor is the disregard for worker safety limited to health

care companies. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is currently investigating the deaths of three Amazon workers that took place between July 13 and August 4 in three New Jersey facilities. UPS workers across the country have been experiencing severe health problems because of the lack of ACs in their cars. One 23-year old UPS driver died from a heat stroke in Southern California in July and another UPS worker collapsed on the front porch of a customer in Arizona.

As of this writing, there have been no reports indicating that the air conditioning problems at Saint Michael's had been fully resolved with a nurse indicating that as of Wednesday, "a lot of the hospital was still really warm."

An additional chiller was set up outside the hospital to help bring down temperatures in the various departments affected by the heat and air conditioning appears to have been put up on the roof. But even if the units are repaired, there is no telling when they will break down again like they did in July and early August. Even without a heat wave, summer temperatures in the 80s have the potential to create dangerous conditions inside the hospital.

The state inspectors, for their part, made their entrance long after the heat crisis had erupted. Air conditioners at Saint Michael's had been breaking down intermittently throughout the entire month of July. No fewer than three heat waves were recorded in Newark during that month. On several days, the temperature exceeded 100 degrees. Yet management did nothing substantive to protect patients and staff from the heat.

Around 350 nurses and technicians at Saint Michael's are members of Jersey Nurses Economic Security Organization (JNESO). The union dashed off emails and made phone calls to the OSHA, the Newark Department of Health Code Enforcement, and NJDOH starting in mid-July. The union's advice to health care workers at the hospital, during a heat wave that lasted from July 12 to July 14, was the following: "Should you feel ill or suffer the consequences of working in this environment, REPORT TO THE ER IMMEDIATELY!" In other words, workers who were overcome by the heat in their department were to report to the emergency room, where they would be further overcome by the heat in that department.

JNESO bears direct responsibility for the dangerous conditions that workers face inside the hospital. It has worked closely with management to shut down a militant month-long strike by workers at that hospital for better working and living conditions in June. Union officials conducted closed-door negotiations with Prime Health,

and ultimately with a state arbitrator, to ram through a sell-out contract that workers were not even given to read.

The conditions at Saint Michael's, which put both patients and staff at risk, are a direct result of the demobilization of workers by the union. After the sellout, the WSWS wrote, "The struggle at Saint Michael's has only begun. None of the issues confronting health care workers here have been resolved, and none of them are limited to that hospital. But the next steps in the fight must proceed in opposition to and independently of the union bureaucracy. ...Workers at Saint Michael's are not alone. Their struggle is part of a growing global movement by the working class in opposition to intolerable working and living conditions, austerity and war."

Since the shut-down of the June strike, major struggles by workers have continued to develop in Turkey, Germany, Great Britain, Sri Lanka, as well as rail and mental health workers in the US. The fight against dangerous working conditions at Saint Michael's can only be waged successfully if workers take matters into their own hands and link up with health care and other workers across the US and internationally. We urge workers at Saint Michael's to contact us to discuss how to form a rank-and-file committee as part of the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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