

The Nicole Linton case: Deadly crash in Los Angeles sheds light on exhausting conditions, mental stress facing nurses

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Nicole Linton, a 37-year-old traveling nurse, was behind the wheel in a deadly car crash on August 4 that killed five people. At the time of the incident, she worked at Kaiser Permanente's West Los Angeles Medical Center. Linton is being charged with five counts of vehicular manslaughter and six counts of murder, including the fetus of a pregnant woman who was among the crash victims. The nurse faces 90 years to life if convicted.

Linton has previously been involved in several minor accidents and has a history of chronic mental health issues. In 2018, she had an episode where she suffered a frontal lobe epilepsy seizure and fell into a catatonic state, the first of several such events. Her sister says she was on a video call with her just a few minutes before the crash and believed that she was having a manic episode. Perhaps most significantly, in fulfilling her duties as a nurse, she had not been able to sleep for four days before the crash.

Linton has expressed deep remorse for the accident and has been distraught in all court appearances. While expressing heartfelt sympathy for the victims of the crash, Nicole's sister, Camille Linton, launched a website, NicoleLintonStory.com, to support her sister and to bring attention to mental health issues.

In the weeks following the accident, the media has sought to demonize Linton, echoing the prosecution's claims that her actions were deliberate. They have argued that Linton had "complete control over steering, maintaining the tilt of the steering wheel to keep her car traveling directly toward the crowded intersection," and that the crash was a "horrific, conscious act." To exaggerate her driving record, they are claiming that she has been involved in 13 "accidents." In reality, Nicole has had 13 "prior reportable incidents," which for the most

part consist of a handful of tickets and other such minor traffic violations, some of which are from over ten years ago.

Judge Victoria Wilson has sided with the prosecution, making statements like "she stole six innocent lives," in her remarks while denying Linton bail. It must be pointed out that the sixth murder charge for the death of an "unborn child" is an adaptation to the religious right and comes in the aftermath of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. The right-wing media in particular has jumped on this and is braying for a heavy sentence.

This tragedy is the result of a confluence of the mental-health crisis and of the overwork and stress that is pervasive in the health care industry. At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, nurses were frontline workers and were often lauded as "heroes." Their conditions, however, have not lived up to these accolades. Nursing is among the most stressful and exhausting jobs in the United States.

Since the pandemic, nurses have had to face the daily risk of contracting COVID-19 themselves or of spreading it to loved ones, as well as the spectacle of mass death that resulted several times in the digging of mass graves. PTSD has become commonplace among nurses and about 90 percent report at least one form of mental health issue or another.

Long hours, overwork, burnout and low pay are ubiquitous, and in fact predate the pandemic. Conditions are so bad that many nurses and other health care workers have simply left the profession, contributing to the nursing shortage. It is expected that there will be a shortage of 200,000–450,000 nurses by 2025.

Linton's lack of sleep for four days and the stressful conditions and long work hours required of her as a nurse undoubtedly exacerbated her mental health issues. Many

nurses have experienced working many shifts in a row, with few hours to sleep in between, a situation that greatly impairs one's judgment and focus.

In 2016, 1,200 Kaiser Permanente Los Angeles Medical Center (LAMC) nurses conducted a one-week strike against unsafe cuts to staffing, wage freezes and other attacks by the health care giant. More than 22,000 Kaiser nurses, including at LAMC, are locked in a current contract battle where the demands for safe staffing levels is central.

To its discredit, the California Nurses Association/National Nurses United has kept a cowardly silence on the witch-hunting of Linton.

Rank-and-file nurses have responded to the oppressive conditions by launching a series of strikes calling for massive hiring, safer working conditions and higher pay. A three-day statewide strike by 15,000 Minnesota nurses just concluded last Wednesday, nurses at Kaleida Health in New York and at Michigan Medicine have voted by massive margins to authorize strikes and there are currently 2,000 mental health workers on strike in Northern California who have been out for more than five weeks. They all confront the same basic problems.

The working class as a whole has begun to move to fight for better conditions. Nurses, auto, railroad and longshore workers, teachers and more have all engaged in or pushed for strike action over the last several years. Confronted with inflation, the threat of war, the continuing threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and all manner of political reaction, the working class has been compelled to fight for itself.

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Increasingly, workers are taking up the call for the formation of rank-and-file committees to take the initiative of their struggles out of the hands of corporatist unions.

It is in this regard that the campaign against Linton takes on particular significance. Largely discredited, and completely responsible for the social crisis, the ruling class is trying to shift the blame. By demonizing Linton, it hopes to absolve, or at least distract from, its own responsibility for the accident. A serious investigation would have to ask: Would the crash still have happened if Nicole had eight hours of sleep the previous night? What about if she had proper help, or even better, if her job didn't breed mental health illness?

This is not the first time this has happened either. It bears similarity to at least two other recent cases:

The first is that of Radonda Vaught, a Tennessee nurse who made a medication error that resulted in the death of her patient in 2017. Vaught immediately admitted her mistake and reported it through all the proper channels, but was nonetheless taken to court for criminally negligent homicide. The medication protocols her hospital was using were outdated and problematic and regularly required nurses to override the system in order to administer medication. Vanderbilt University Medical Center did not support her through the ordeal. She was similarly denounced in the media, and it took mass demonstrations by nurses around the country, organized by rank-and-file health care workers independently of the unions, to keep her out of jail, although she still received three years probation and lost her license.

The second is that of Michelle Heughins, a North Carolina prison nurse held responsible for the 2019 death of inmate John Neville. In her case, Neville grew ill while in his cell but care was delayed, and officers responded by handcuffing him, kneeling on his back and hog-tying him and placing him in a prone position known to cause asphyxiation. Heughins was the only one who tried to help him, but when she failed she was held criminally responsible. None of the officers were charged. The North Carolina Supreme Court even passed a law making it so nurses could be held responsible for medical errors, to make sure workers are held responsible for these deaths.

In Linton's case, the deaths didn't come as an immediate consequence of actions she took on her job, but nonetheless this tragedy was an indirect consequence of the pressures placed on the working class by the subordination of health care to profit. By scapegoating workers such as Vaught, Heughins and Linton, the ruling class hopes that the senses might be dulled enough to avoid these questions.



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