Nurses in Joliet, Illinois organize protest after three ER nurses escorted off the premises for demanding safe staffing

Benjamin Mateus
23 October 2022

On Saturday night, nurses at Ascension Saint Joseph's Medical Center of Joliet held a rally in front of the hospital with more than 100 in attendance. They were protesting the dire staffing shortages at the hospital, as well as the escorting of three nurses off the premises the night before for raising concerns about the staffing in the emergency department. According to Pat Meade, treasurer for the St. Joseph Nurses Association, the three nurses have since been suspended by the health system.

John Fitzgerald, a staff representative for the nurses at St. Joe's hospital, explained at the gathering that the nurses on Friday night requested adequate coverage for the shift. The nurses were told that some managers would be available to cover part of the shift but would not stay the whole night. When the nurses said that wasn't adequate, "security was called on them and they were marched out of the hospital."

Fitzgerald added that the hospital has had several "sentinel" events—events that have led to patient deaths or permanent or temporary harm—due to unsafe staffing. "My understanding is that there were at least two sentinel events in this hospital that derive from unsafe staffing in this past week."

Many of them center on issues of medication error, which is an unfortunate reality across the country. Hospitals have sought to pin the blame on nurses, as in the case of former Vanderbilt nurse RaDonda Vaught.

In attendance at the rally was Timothy Nelson, an Ascension spokesman, who offered a perfunctory PR statement claiming, "[St. Joe's was] committed to working in partnership with our nurses, while also respecting the terms of our labor contract. In doing so, we are conducting a thorough investigation of recent events."

According to their agreement in July 2020, Amita, now Ascension Saint Joseph, would improve staffing guidelines on certain units and consult with the union on staffing issues by the end of 2020. Nurses were facing patient ratios of lower than one nurse to 12 patients. According to the Illinois Nurses Association, hospital guidelines required the unit be staffed with at least 10 nurses, but generally, safe staffing ratios in emergency rooms are much lower than other areas. On Friday night, only four were available to render care for more than 50 patients.

One of the tenets in health care is the need to call for help when it is necessary for a patient's safety. The ejection and suspension of the nurses not only violates this, but also appears to be a violation of the nurses' contract and hospital safety protocols.

Hannah Puhr, a day shift Emergency Room (ER) nurse spoke at length on behalf of the night shift nurses. "They were scheduled to have four staff members when they should have had anywhere from 12 to 14 last night. There were 51 patients in the ER at that time. If you do the math, it's incredible and dangerous. We were very concerned about it. This has been happening for months and years and enough is enough. We are sick of it. We care about our patients, and we don't want to be making do when our patients are suffering."

Puhr then made an appeal to her colleagues and media representatives at the rally. "We are asking for help. We are asking for staff. We are asking for resources so that we can care for this community and that we can have a functioning hospital, and we are ready to do it. We are ready to do the hard work."

Intensive Care Unit (ICU) nurse Katherine Soprych

© World Socialist Web Site

recalled that recently she had come to work and was told that the nurse-to-patient ratios would be one to four. Although they were able to negotiate to one to three, it is a dangerous situation when patients can suddenly become unstable and require close and vigilant monitoring. Standard practice has dictated no more than two patients for one critical care nurse.

St. Joe's nurses conducted a 16-day strike more than two years ago demanding improvement in staffing shortages, but these issues have still not been resolved after the strike was contained and isolated by union officials. At the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* called on the nurses to expand the strike, which took place in the initial months of the pandemic.

At the time, we wrote, "Rather than expanding the struggle for safe staffing levels by spreading the strike to other sections of the hospital and health care workers in Chicago and beyond, the union officials said the INA and other unions were appealing to the Illinois state legislature to pass House Bill 2604, the 'Safe Patient Limits Act' pushed by state Democrats, which would supposedly hold hospitals in general accountable for staffing ratios."

The objections raised by the three nurses on Friday is the spontaneous action by the rank-and-file to a dangerous and untenable situation. And the response by the health care system was predictable and an offense to the working class. The actions of the three nurses must be applauded and nurses everywhere must mobilize to demand their reinstatement.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site