

Walgreens Pharmacy employees walk out across the US against unsafe working conditions

Benjamin Mateus
10 October 2023

Are you a pharmacy worker? Tell us what your working conditions are like by filling out the form below. All submissions will remain anonymous.

On Monday, non-union pharmacy employees, including pharmacists, technicians and support staff launched a three-day walkout at Walgreens stores nationwide to protest poor working conditions.

Although the exact number of workers that have joined the Walgreens walkout is unclear, it has received broad support among employees of pharmacy chains who are facing dire working conditions with the oncoming winter season and demands for vaccinations against COVID, flu and RSV as well as others.

It comes within the context of a growing wave of strikes and protests by healthcare workers, who have been made to shoulder the burden of the collapse of the healthcare system due to incompetent and criminal response to the coronavirus pandemic. Last week, 75,000 Kaiser Permanente workers took part in a three-day walkout, the largest healthcare strike, by number of workers involved, in US history.

The Walgreens walkouts also follow local walkouts by CVS pharmacists in Kansas City, Missouri two weeks ago to protest staff cuts. As one pharmacist told *The Kansas City Star*, “It’s like running a McDonald’s with just one person.”

In a post on *Reddit* calling for the nationwide walkout at Walgreens, one pharmacist described the terrible working conditions:

It’s about time we stand up and demand that Walgreens prioritize patient health and safety. The current regime has continued to cut hours

while adding more tasks. This is unsafe for our patients and for Walgreens employees. I have spent hours explaining to patients why we scheduled them an appointment for a vaccine we didn’t have. I’ve also given over 100 vaccines in a day all by myself while 600+ leaflets lay on the counter. 2 of my technicians walked out mid shift. My pharmacy has historically been top of the chain but these corporate demands are unrealistic and unfair to us and to our patients. I’ve asked for help and voiced my concerns just as you have. They call you all whiners and tell you that you aren’t “meeting expectations.” When will they meet our expectations? When will they give us the support to meet the expectations of our patients?

Pharmacy workers often have to work alone standing on their feet for up to 12 hours or more, without even a bathroom break. Meanwhile, pharmacy retail chains like Walmart, CVS and Walgreens are cutting back on hours by 10 to 20 percent to compensate for understaffing. This means cuts to pay, while pharmacists complain that they are expected to fill the same volume of prescriptions with less staff and time.

The companies have insisted that the reduction in hours is partially due to a decline in demand for prescriptions during the summer. They also claim that it gives pharmacists an opportunity for a better work-life balance.

But Michael Hogue, the Dean of Loma Linda University School of Pharmacy in Southern California and American Pharmacists Association’s liaison

representative to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), countered that there is no data to support such ludicrous assertions. He notes that the underlying reason for these scale backs has to do with a shortage of pharmacy technicians, who function as the backbone of a running pharmacy.

In addition to filling prescriptions, pharmacy workers deal with administrative and regulatory issues and conduct patient counseling, including primary care services such as administering vaccines and COVID tests. Pharmacy technicians make poverty wages in exchange for counting out pills, answering phone calls, and stocking shelves and ordering supplies.

The conditions that pharmacists rallied against in 2021 at the height of the COVID pandemic, have only grown more urgent and untenable. “We work 12-hour shifts without technicians, we have no breaks and no lunch breaks as the drive-thru has to be open. We have not had a raise in four years,” one pharmacist told the WSWS at the time.

The US Bureau of labor Statistics is predicting that the need for pharmacists will outpace industry growth. More than 78 percent of pharmacists have reported workload exhaustion, up from 22 percent before the pandemic. At large pharmacy chains, a 2021 survey by Ohio state found 92 percent don’t have adequate time to complete their job in a safe and effective manner.

A Pharmacy Workforce Center study released in May 2023 found that a large majority of respondents described the shortage of technicians as “severe” or “very severe.” More than 75 percent indicated poor job satisfaction. More than one-third said they would likely search for a different job next year. Many cited burnout and fear that they will cause harm to their patients making a medication mistake due to overwork.

A 2018 meta-analysis published in the *British Medical Journal Open Quality* found that community pharmacy error rates in the US between 1993 and 2015 were between 1.4 and 1.8 percent of all prescriptions. Other studies indicate that the rates were higher, between 1.7 and 2.2 percent, with one in 20 of these being clinically significant.

In 2018, there were 67,000 retail/community pharmacies dispensing 4.4 billion prescriptions each year. This amounts to 51.5 million errors dispensed each year across the country. One can only assume

these astounding figures for have only grown since the start of the pandemic.

In the US alone, between 7,000 to 9,000 people die each year as a result of medication errors. It is likely that hundreds of thousands have adverse reactions that go unreported. These medication errors account for \$40 billion annual healthcare costs alone, not including the burden on the patient, their family and health system in general.

During the pandemic, pharmacies have distributed 70 percent of the COVID vaccines. They also administer half of all the flu vaccines, as well as vaccines for pneumonia, tetanus, HPV, and others. Given that COVID vaccines have now been commercialized, the added burden of insurance verification is compounding their workload.

Meanwhile, the major pharmacy chains continue to rake in massive revenues. According to a 2022 report by *Bloomberg*, “US drugstore sales accounted for 85 percent of the \$132.5 billion in revenue Walgreens recorded last year [2021], with the rest coming from its international business. Drugstores represent a little less than one third of the \$268.7 billion in sales CVS recorded in 2020, the most recent year of annual results from the company, which also owns a pharmacy-benefits manager and a health insurer. Although pharmacies play a smaller role financially at CVS, they’re still hugely important to the company’s strategy to ‘reimagine healthcare,’ with company executives referring to its stores as the front door to its brand.”

The right to free and comprehensive medical care and the necessary pharmaceuticals also means the investment in training a legion of staff that can meet the demands of the population for such services. It is the inherent democratic and social right of every worker to these critical life-saving drugs and treatments that have been acquired over decades and centuries.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact