

Healthcare workers speak from the picket lines at St. Francis Medical Center

Our reporters

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Last week, 1,500 healthcare workers struck at St. Francis Medical Center and three other Southern California medical facilities run by Prime Healthcare. Their strike comes on the heels of the strike by 85,000 Kaiser Permanente workers across the country, the largest healthcare workers' strike in US history. Like their counterparts at Kaiser, they are striking for better wages and higher staffing.

Prime is a major healthcare conglomerate that is notorious for its ruthless cost-cutting and slashing in the pursuit of profit, often at the expense of patients. With its 45 hospitals and some 300 outpatient clinics, it has a history of aggressively going after patients for unpaid bills, turning away those without insurance and buying and gutting floundering hospitals to make a quick profit. This summer, 300 healthcare workers struck at St. Michael's in New Jersey, a facility also owned by Prime.

Prem Reddy, the CEO of Prime, made his fortune off looting the healthcare system. When hospitals or other healthcare facilities go bankrupt, Prime sweeps them up at bargain prices and sells off assets while preserving the more lucrative services. After buying hospitals, it has previously suspended chemotherapy treatments, mental health care and birthing center services while continuing elective surgeries.

St. Francis itself was acquired by Prime in August 2020 after the hospital's former parent company, Verity Health, filed for bankruptcy. One of Prime's first acts was to carry out layoffs at the hospital, something that a number of strikers spoke about with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters.

An OB-GYN nurse who wished to remain anonymous described this process:

This facility has always made money, but it supported the other facilities in our complex, and we always provided for the other ones to sustain. When it wasn't sustainable anymore, then they sold us independently, and everybody wanted St. Francis, because St. Francis has always made money. So Prime took over, they decreased the salary by 12 percent.

When they took us over in 2020, they cut out 20 percent of the nurses, the high senior nurses. Of course, they were the highest paid, but they're all specialty. They're all very, very well-educated and trained in their department. So they got rid of them. Then they kept us in a freeze for three years. The language that they have in the contract is a bankruptcy contract language. It wasn't negotiated between the union and Prime. The courts gave it to them. Whatever they wanted, they got.

While these workers are fighting to improve their own conditions, the well-being of patients is always at the forefront of their mind. In particular, the staffing crisis has hurt patient outcomes and well-being, and this weighs on those who work to help them.

Rene, a respiratory therapist of ten years, commented:

The number one reason we're out here striking is because we need better patient care. Since Prime Healthcare bought this facility three years ago, the patient care has suffered. We see the nursing staff where you know they'll give them three or four patients in ICU (Intensive Care Unit), and that's too much.

Those patients are very critical, and it's unsafe.

Even on the floors, they're constantly understaffed, and they have more patients than they should. So then that patient doesn't get the care that they need. We have lost patients. We're very overworked, and they've continued to keep us understaffed, because then, you know, that puts money in their pockets, but it takes away from the patient care.

Healthcare workers confront the same problems everywhere that strikes are breaking out, whether at St. Francis, Kaiser Permanente or at the now months-long strike at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in New Jersey. Their common conditions, and the common rapacity of their employers, are both products of the profit-driven healthcare system under capitalism.

When asked about profit in healthcare, Rene remarked, "As far as the idea of for-profit medical care, it's not a good thing. It's impossible, including with a trauma center. You don't know if those patients have insurance or not, but we still have to care for them."

Anhthai, an ER tech of three years, asked, "How can this be for profit? That seems to be the way of most American healthcare hospitals and clinics these days. Family practices are getting bought out all over the place by these, you know, megacorps. As if the pandemic didn't show us enough, how many people have to die for us to realize that hey, maybe healthcare shouldn't be about making money?"

Anhthai concluded by calling for a common struggle with Kaiser workers, saying, "What we're asking for here is definitely what a lot of other places are asking for as well. I don't see why we shouldn't get together because we're all being exploited. You know, I feel like we would definitely have more power together."



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