

Scapegoated nurse RaDonda Vaught loses appeal for reinstatement of nursing license

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It has been 19 months since former Vanderbilt University Medical Center (VUMC) nurse RaDonda Vaught was found guilty of criminally negligent homicide and abuse of an impaired adult in the death of 75-year-old Charlene Murphey on December 27, 2017. Nurses and healthcare workers across the US and the world rallied in opposition to the politically motivated case, which sought to scapegoat her for the tragic medical error and cover up the hospital's responsibility.

In the face of this popular outpouring of support, a Tennessee judge in May 2022 opted to reject the vindictive demands by state prosecutors to put Vaught in prison for eight years, and instead sentenced her to three years probation, with no jail time. Nevertheless, the judge stripped Vaught of her nursing license.

On March 28, 2023, Vaught returned to the Court of Chancery with her attorney to request a hearing with the Tennessee Board of Nursing with the goal of making the Board accountable when it revokes a nurse's license without due process. Vaught was fighting on principle: She said she had no interest in ever practicing nursing again and did not believe she would be given her license back.

In the first investigation done by the Board of Nursing, the case was dismissed without any corrective action or probationary period against Vaught, and she was able to continue working. However, in 2021 the Board launched a second investigation and revoked her license, leaving her without the ability to work in the nursing field.

On November 27, a Tennessee judge rejected Vaught's motion to appeal the state board's 2021 decision to revoke her license, which prevents her from undergoing a new trial with the Board of Nursing. The persecution of Vaught opened the door for increased

attacks against other nurses and healthcare workers as a whole. Since being sentenced and stripped of her nursing license, others have been criminally charged or sentenced for various reasons, including many who do not make headlines.

Nurses face horrific working conditions everywhere. Since the pandemic, nurses have had to face the daily risk of contracting COVID-19. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has become commonplace among nurses, and about 90 percent report at least one form of mental health issue or another. Long hours, overwork and low pay are universal, and nurses are leaving the profession in droves due to burnout. It is expected that there will be a shortage of 200,000–450,000 nurses in the United States by 2025.

The scapegoating of nurses is being pushed by the political establishment and the for-profit healthcare industry and rubber-stamped by the trade union bureaucrats who leave nurses out to dry.

The National Nurses United (NNU) is the largest nurses union in the US and intimately connected to the Democratic Party and AFL-CIO. It took no action to mobilize all healthcare workers to defend Vaught, and has sabotaged every strike and struggle against understaffing and poor wages and working conditions which have erupted across the country. The NNU and other nurse unions have taken no measures to protect the lives of nurses during the pandemic, leaving them to essentially fend for themselves.

The Biden administration's criminal policy of unmitigated spread of SARS-CoV-2 will continue to exacerbate the nursing shortage. The US is now in its eighth wave of mass infection, fueled by the JN.1 subvariant, the progeny of XBB.2.86 (Pirola). It is expected to become the dominant strain globally over the next several weeks.

According to expert modelers, as of November 29, 2023, wastewater estimates show high levels of transmission, with 850,000 to 1.2 million daily infections taking place across the country. The rate of infection will increase the rate of weekly hospitalizations, leading to the overwhelming of healthcare systems adding to the already horrific conditions nurses are faced with.

Nurses must understand that the horrible conditions and victimizations that they face in the workplace are directly connected to the capitalist system that places profits above human life. Currently, the US and the imperialist powers in Europe are supporting the bombing of hospitals that have killed scores of patients, doctors, nurses and healthcare workers in Gaza. The Israeli occupation forces have laid siege to several hospitals, massacring innocent civilians seeking refuge or treatment.

As the WSWs wrote on May 13, 2022, “[A]ll the underlying issues behind this case remain. Vaught has been scapegoated for the consequences of chronic understaffing and the ‘system failures’ that exist in hospitals throughout the country.

“The entire medical system is under the grip of giant hospital chains, insurance companies and pharmaceutical and medical equipment monopolies that operate on the basis of profit, not the needs of patients and health care workers.”

Over the past year there has been a growing strike wave by the international working class to beat back decades of austerity measures, wars and the attack on democratic rights. In the US alone, more than a third of the largest strikes this year, involving over 100,000 workers, were carried out by nurses and other healthcare workers.

Nurses and all workers are coming into struggle against the capitalist system that subordinates them to the profit system and then blames them for the social crisis. But in order for nurses to win their struggle, they must build their own rank-and-file committees to link up their struggles with workers across the US and internationally.

A network of rank-and-file committees, comprised of nurses and other healthcare workers in every hospital and healthcare facility, can coordinate a serious fight for safe staffing, wage increases, mental health services, a massive infusion of funds into the healthcare

system and an end to the subordination of healthcare to private profit.

This struggle must be developed into a political fight by the whole working class against both parties of Wall Street, austerity and war and for socialism, including a socialist system of medicine.



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