

Protesters demand reinstatement for victimized Southern California healthcare workers

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Following a series of strikes at the end of 2023 at its St Francis Medical Center in Lynwood, California, Prime Healthcare retaliated against strikers by firing workers who participated in a rally outside their Ontario headquarters. Seven workers were fired, according to Prime, for “trespassing” on company headquarters, despite the fact that they were there on business relating to the strike. Two more were later fired simply for having been present. Those fired included the entire union bargaining team.

St Francis is a level one trauma center, meaning it is able to provide the highest level of trauma care to critically injured patients. It is the only one in the region, and provides services not just for Lynwood, but for neighboring cities as well. However, it is plagued with understaffing issues, as are hospitals around the United States. One nurse told the *World Socialist Web Site* she was the only full-time wound nurse for the entire hospital.

Prime Healthcare acquired the hospital in 2021. Prime occupies an important niche, from the standpoint of investors, in the for-profit healthcare industry, as an asset stripper for ailing healthcare institutions. Prime has been involved in a number of scandals involving tax dodges, denying care to Medicare recipients and the naked gutting of healthcare infrastructure.

On Tuesday night, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Health Care Professionals (UNAC/UHCP) held a vigil for the nine workers who have been fired. After the vigil, there was a brief march to a City Council meeting, which took a vote to condemn the retaliation and called on Prime to rehire the victimized healthcare workers. However, nothing was voted on that would compel Prime to actually rehire them.

After the City Council meeting, the WSWWS spoke to

Mayra Castaneda, an LVN and ultrasound technologist who was on the bargaining team and who was among the nine fired by Prime. Mayra had worked at St Francis for 25 years before she and her coworkers were summarily fired.

“I also worked at Centinella, who’s also Prime, where they recently closed the maternity unit, which covers an underserved, underprivileged community of Hispanics and African-Americans. Those services are gone there. Here at St. Francis Medical Center, I can tell you that they closed their skilled nursing facility from the minute they took over, so we no longer have the skilled nursing facility at St. Francis that we had for the more than 25 years that I’ve been working there.

“And that’s just the beginning. What other services are gonna be cut? Part of the conditions of the sale for St. Francis Medical Center three years ago was to keep a pediatric unit open. That doesn’t exist right now at St. Francis. Though on paper they may have nurses hired for pediatrics, and they may order supplies and have a secretary for pediatrics, we do not have a pediatrics unit actually functioning in that hospital.”

She also commented on the genocide in Gaza and the drive to war: “I mean, it’s clear that the entire world is at a struggle, right? I stand firm with ceasefire. I mean, we can’t continue. What we’re living is World War III. That’s what we’re living right now. People say World War III is coming, it’s here. And we need to find a solution to end everything that’s taking place, not just in Gaza, but in many different places around the world.”

The WSWWS spoke to several other workers at the rally, most of whom wished to remain anonymous to protect themselves from further retaliation.

“These nine workers, they were part of the bargaining team,” one worker said. “They were the bargaining team,

but they figured if they can chop their heads off at the top, we won't be strong. During the second strike when they provided the papers, that's when they were fired. On top of the nine fired, we're just trying to negotiate patient safety, negotiate a raise that we never got prior to COVID...

"Management is very reactive here. Any equipment, anything that can go out, they wait until it goes out [before replacing it]. I can talk about a computer system that I've been asking for two years, and then finally it went dead in October. Did they help me? 'Oh, we'll get back with you,' they said We're going to see in February. So I don't even know what missing instruments are missing."

Another worker jumped in, "The IV bags? Before, it was like, I don't know how much they used to pay for one bag, but now it seems like they pay five cents for each bag. If you drop it on the floor, it just opens. They give us the cheapest supply possible for this community. Bottles of sterile water too, they just rip. But they receive the money, the money, and they try to squeeze more money out of everything... Since they took over, they switched everything, all our supplies, to the cheapest ones they could find.

"I know a surgical tech who went to school, learned how to sterilize instrumentation for surgery, and tells me her daughter makes more money than she does. She works at Chipotle. It's awful.

"[Prime's CEO, Prem Reddy] believes he can keep churning, and churning, because the money keeps coming. We're an expense, that's all we are. He'd cut us if he could. They're churning the money out of trauma. So the only services, they're limiting certain services for the profit. For profit. We work for a profit hospital."

The anger of workers at the demonstration was entirely justified, and the WSWs supports the demand for the immediate reinstatement of the workers. But the union bureaucracy offered no perspective except to call upon local Democrats for support. But whatever the maneuvering by the mayor and City Council to posture as friends of workers—Prime refused to allow them access to inspect parts of the hospital during the strike in December—the perspective of pressuring the capitalist Democratic Party will lead nowhere.

Prem Reddy, the CEO of Prime, is himself a major donor to both the Republicans and the Democrats. The Democratic Party itself has jointly presided over the total dismantling of public health measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including even basic reporting

mechanisms. And it is also directly responsible for the genocide in Gaza, where the Israeli military has deliberately targeted hospitals with US-made bombs.

In California, the Democrats have presided over and defended private healthcare throughout the pandemic. While the healthcare unions and Governor Newsom are promoting a bill that would establish a \$25 minimum wage for healthcare workers in the state, it has been loaded with conditions and budgetary caveats, so that in practice it will only apply to a small minority of healthcare workers. Even this limited measure has been put on hold by the Newsom administration, after corporations began firing thousands of workers in retaliation against the law.

This includes healthcare provider Kaiser Permanente, which announced hundreds of job cuts even in the midst of a massive surge of coronavirus and other infectious diseases.

Instead, the fight to reinstate the "Prime 9" requires the mobilization of the working class, independent of the two-party system. This also requires a fight against the pro-corporate trade union bureaucracy, which has helped to enforce sellouts at hospital systems across the United States. The bureaucracy is terrified that mobilizing a serious struggle involving the rank-and-file would threaten the apparatus' control and its corrupt ties with the government and hospital administrations.

The way forward is through the formation of rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves. These committees would appeal for the broadest possible unity with healthcare workers' real allies, the working class in every industry across the state of California and the United States.



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