

Ascension St. John clinicians speak out during 24 hour strike

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with striking clinicians at Ascension St. John as their 24-hour strike drew to a close. The 43 striking clinicians are part of the newly formed Greater Detroit Association of Emergency Physicians union, and their strike is aimed at a private equity-funded staffing company called TeamHealth that runs the St. John emergency room. The clinicians have been in negotiations with TeamHealth for their first contract since July.

Dr. Michelle Weiner told reporters, “We have tried every other route, including unionization and collective bargaining and now we are on the front lawn of the hospital.”

She continued by describing how the conditions at St. John relate to larger, national issues in healthcare. “It’s all across the country. It’s everywhere. I think when people see [this strike] they aren’t surprised because they know they can’t get in to see their doctor, they can’t get in to see a specialist. A lot of people in this community can’t afford to go to urgent care so it drives everyone to the emergency department.”

Dr. Romajit Yatoome expressed similar sentiments. “We are bringing attention to other physicians, telling them that they aren’t alone in this, that this is happening everywhere. But first and foremost we are doing this for our patients, our patients don’t know why they are waiting 10 or 15 hours to be seen. They don’t understand that it’s a staffing issue. It’s not that we don’t want to see them. No, we are here for them. We are here to see them, to treat everyone the same but we don’t have enough resources to do that”

All clinicians brought up the struggle of trying to treat patients without the proper staffing, resources and time. Dr. Romajit Yatoome continued, “The big reason that we are on strike is because we are all feeling the

pinch of the staffing shortages. It’s not just the physicians, but the nurses, techs, and social workers as well. We are all so overworked and patients are waiting 10 to 15 hours just to see a physician. This is not acceptable for anyone. Our patients are just as deserving as any other patients to get expeditious care especially in the emergency department. If it’s a true emergency you can’t have people sitting out there or bad things can happen.”

Dr. Dilaz Paniwaz added, “We took an oath to do no harm. When I walk into my shift and see a full waiting room and I don’t have the staff to take care of them appropriately and I know that anyone who is basically not dying won’t be coming back [to see a doctor], that doesn’t sit well with me. That’s not why I came into medicine. I came in to help people and I’m asking for the resources to do that.”

She agreed that throughout the pandemic lots of staff became burnt out and left the field and were never replaced. “Staffing is a big issue. We are not given the resources to do everything the way we want.”

Clinicians held signs that read “Patients over Profit” and spoke against the impact of private-equity firms such as TeamHealth in healthcare.

Physicians Assistant, Casey Kolp told reporters, “When private equity groups come into medicine, corners get cut. It’s a great business model, but it’s not a business model for healthcare because you’re dealing with human lives. Every corner you cut, that’s someone’s mom, that’s someone’s daughter, that’s the corner you’re cutting.”

Dr. Shaun Gray explained to the reporters that although the staff is well-trained, they would be unable to handle any kind of mass casualty event under the current circumstances. “When you’re understaffed and you’re under supplied and you don’t have the

resources, I mean your imagination could take it where it could go.

“Healthcare systems should have the tools and requirements set up so that the community, God forbid anything like that happens, we’re ready. That’s what the ER is. We’re trained to handle anything that comes through those doors. But we don’t have the supplies. We don’t have the infrastructure. We don’t have the staffing to be able to do that. So I would fear if there was a terrorist attack, if there was a mass casualty event, what would happen? I could only speculate the chaos that would ensue.”

Another physician who asked to remain anonymous reported that they are receiving an enormous amount of support from the nurses and ancillary staff in the hospital. He then spoke on the conditions facing other workers. “None of us are in this for ourselves. The nurses are terribly overworked, and much of the staff is burnt out.”

He then spoke about how conditions have worsened since the onset of the pandemic. I have seen a lot of changes over the years. Before COVID. We were had, we had 350 to 350 patients a day. Now we have half that number. And we're overburdened. Because the staff is so short. Whereas before we had 25 nurses, now we're down to 10.”



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