

P R E S S R E L E A S E

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 31, 2021

Contact: communication@afgenvac.org

RALLY AT 11:00AM

St. Louis Veterans Affairs Union Members to Rally for Racial Justice, Protest Widespread Discrimination at Facility

Protest Comes Amidst a Years-Long Fight for a Fair Union Contract, as Negotiations with Biden's VA Set to Commence Shortly

St. Louis, Mo. - On Saturday, July 31, members of the American Federation of Government Employees' National VA Council (AFGE NVAC) - the union representing over 265,000 Veterans Affairs (VA) workers - Locals 96 and 2192 will unite in a Rally For Justice to protest the widespread systemic racism they face as workers at their local VA facilities.

For years, St. Louis VA workers have faced ongoing racial discrimination. Workers have reported instances of racism during hirings, promotions, performance reviews, time-off request approvals, and everyday treatment. Despite workers raising their concerns to the union and to management, filing dozens of Equal Employment Opportunity complaints, the local VA has repeatedly opted to sweep the issues under the rug.

Workers are coming together on Saturday to demand respect and protection from discrimination on the job, calling on local management to hold those responsible accountable to their actions.

WHAT: VA Workers Rally For Justice

WHEN: Saturday, July 31, 2021 - 11:00 a.m. CT

WHERE: Outside the Local VA Medical Center
915 N. Grand Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63106

WHO: AFGE Local 96 members, Veteran Healthcare
AFGE Local 2192 members, Veteran Benefit Administration
Local Community Supporters

Participating local AFGE members will be available on the ground for media interviews.

Members of AFGE NVAC have been [fighting for a fair contract for years](#), demanding safe working conditions and adequate staffing levels, the space and equipment they need to ensure veterans receive the best care possible, and mechanisms to protect workers from the whims of management.

The importance of a fair contract is a matter of life and death during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has claimed the lives of over [145 VA employees](#) and over [12,567 veterans](#) - making it deadlier for American veterans than the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars combined. Instead of listening to VA workers when they raised the alarm about PPE shortages at the

start of the pandemic, Secretary Wilkie and VA officials dismissed them and only acknowledged the shortages once [internal memos were leaked](#).

In January 2021 - nine months into the pandemic - AFGE NVAC released the results of a nationwide survey that revealed the VA has grossly mishandled its COVID-19 response, putting both VA workers and veterans nationwide at risk of contracting the virus. Notably, [60% of respondents](#) reported that their facility did not alert them when fellow staff members contracted COVID-19 and nearly 50% of respondents stated that they were not notified prior to working with COVID-19 positive patients. VA workers need a strong contract in order to protect themselves during future pandemics and national crises of this nature.

In addition to the COVID-19 related issues that VA workers face, AFGE released the [results of a 2020 nationwide survey](#) that revealed rampant racism at the VA going unchecked under Secretary Robert Wilkie, who was appointed by President Donald Trump amid controversy over Wilkie's longtime membership in the [Sons of Confederate Veterans](#). Notably, the survey found that 78% of respondents reported that systemic racism is a moderate or serious problem at the VA. And in October, the union obtained [hiring data](#) that show white employees who applied for management positions were selected at double the rate of Black VA workers.

The severity of these surveys exposing systemic racism at the VA are compounded by the fact that Secretary Wilkie helped lead a broad campaign by the previous administration to bring [federal employees to heel](#) by undermining their union. The survey caught the attention of Senators Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) and Brian Schatz (D-Hawai'i), who called on the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to [conduct an investigation into the VA](#) to determine the extent to which systemic racism has impacted the agency.

Last week, AFGE NVAC and the VA finalized and signed a [historic settlement agreement](#), which will solve a number of the major issues VA workers have faced for years, including [reversing](#) the damage done by key Trump-era executive orders, providing relief to front-line workers who have been denied access to their union representatives, restoring the union rights of VA health care professionals, and resetting the previously adversarial relationship between VA management and the unionized workforce -- a critical step toward good faith bargaining over a new collective bargaining agreement, which will be the largest public sector union contract in the United States when finalized.

###