

The Impending Mass Firing of America's Unvaccinated

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Global Research, October 22, 2021
[Chronicles](#) 18 October 2021

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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Zac Spolar found himself running around in a frenzy amid the COVID-19 surge in December, tending to three or four patients at once and laboring late into the night at a Los Angeles hospital. The hardest part of the job, he said, was having to constantly console people who couldn't be with their loved ones in the intensive care unit, even if they were dying.

Now Spolar is among the many essential workers threatened with unemployment and diminished job prospects for refusing vaccination.

Police, firefighters, doctors, nurses, paramedics, airport security and prison guards across the country are facing termination this week if they don't comply with their employers' vaccine requirements. Many have already lost their jobs or have been disciplined. Other say they will defy the vaccine mandates on principle. As a result, essential workers may soon be in short supply in many parts of America.

Spolar said he isn't opposed to vaccination in theory; his wife already got the shot. But he is young and fit with antibodies higher than they would be with a vaccine, thanks to getting COVID from a patient before Christmas. "The only reason I got sick is because I had a week where I worked six days in a row with crazy hours, I wasn't getting any sleep, I was all run down." Not getting the vaccine boils down to a matter of principle for him. Why force someone to take a drug that they don't want or need?

Spolar is now reduced to part-time contract medical work with lower pay and no benefits, retirement, or upward mobility as no hospital will hire him unvaccinated. And with Los Angeles County's [vaccine passport mandate](#) for restaurants, movie theaters, retail establishments, and other places, he cannot move freely in the city he serves.

He is not alone. Los Angeles city employees are required to be vaccinated by Tuesday, Oct. 19. Roughly a quarter of Los Angeles fire personnel have signed a notice of intent to sue the

city if they are terminated for not being vaccinated. There are rebellions in other parts of the country. In Newark, New Jersey, firefighters and police officers are [protesting](#) the city's vaccine mandates. In New York, Gov. Kathy Hochul announced she will [deploy](#) the National Guard to compensate for staff shortages due to the firing of unvaccinated nurses and hospital workers.

The U.S. federal government has set a deadline of Monday, Nov. 22 for all civilian federal workers to be vaccinated. The Transportation Security Administration has said four-in-10 of its employees are unvaccinated; any terminations of TSA staff due to not meeting the deadline would come right before one of America's biggest travel periods, the Thanksgiving holiday. Meanwhile, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Agency is in an uproar over Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas threatening to [terminate](#) a significant portion of the unvaccinated workforce.

Similar protests and potential firings over the COVID vaccines are happening all over America in government workplaces at the federal, state, and local level as well as in many parts of the private sector.

Two days before I spoke with Spolar, an anesthesiologist named [Christopher Rake](#) was escorted out of UCLA Health in California for refusing to be vaccinated on grounds that it violated ethics and personal freedom. He had created a support group for like-minded medical workers, Citizens United for Freedom, made up of both vaccinated and unvaccinated members.

Rake talked to me about his final days on the job. "I wasn't put on the schedule Friday [Oct. 1] but I went to work anyway, and it was a good thing that I did because they called me and said: 'We need your help in operating room eight, somebody called in sick.'" Everything seemed fine until Rake received an email later informing him that he had been placed on administrative leave without pay. Still, he came into work on the next Monday. After a confusing discussion with management about whether he had been terminated or not, security guards led him off the campus.

Rake was just one of many casualties of the first vaccine mandates imposed in September and early October. A hospital in upstate New York made so many of its nurses [resign](#) mid-September over the vaccine that it had to suspend delivering babies. Three weeks later, [Northwell Health](#), New York's largest health care provider, fired 1,400 employees over the same issue. By Oct. 6, [Kaiser Permanente](#) had placed 2,200 employees nationwide on unpaid leave.

But it's not just hospital workers who are getting cut or forced out.

"Me and my coworkers never took time off because of stress," said Josh Sattley, a veteran Beverly Hills firefighter, explaining what it was like working through the pandemic. "When we got sick, we took COVID leave, and then came back to work right after—it wasn't devastating for any of us." Sattley contracted the virus on the job, and he isn't necessarily opposed to vaccines. However, the aggressiveness of the mandates and skepticism of the pharmaceutical industry led him to request a religious exemption after he prayed about the issue.

Sattley said that the Beverly Hills city bureaucracy swatted down the initial slate of applications for religious exemptions. The city implemented its own process to judge

applications, which included religious tests to determine if one is, in fact, a true believer. Sattley described it as an “interrogation” about his religious beliefs.

On the day that the firefighters were scheduled to receive word on their exemptions, Beverly Hills City Councilmember John Mirisch [published](#) an ominous memo in *Beverly Hills Weekly*. “Religious exemptions are meant for deeply held and sincere religious convictions,” he wrote, “they are not hall passes for those who don’t want to take the vaccine, however strong those feelings are or whatever conspiracy theories they may believe.”

Sattley and his colleagues took Mirisch’s letter as a sign that they never had a fair shot. They were right. Out of 25 applications, the vast majority received only temporary exemptions, which will be re-evaluated at the end of an interval. Half a dozen applicants, including Sattley, were outright denied.

“I told the city ‘No,’” Sattley said upon learning of its decision and the ultimatum he faced to get the job. “The next day, on Friday, they shot me a letter stating that I was going to be on leave without pay. I was relieved of duty.”

Termination could be next for Sattley. California firefighters have their own [bill of rights](#), which, in theory, provides them with the most thorough privacy protection of any public employee in the state. Among other things, it entitles them to due process and protection from interrogation. All that has taken a backseat to the ongoing medical state of exception, he said.

Even when they get exemptions, unvaccinated firefighters are subject to a kind of soft discrimination. “The city has removed anybody with an exemption from the frontlines,” Sattley said. “They put them on a rig that doesn’t respond to any emergency calls; they only go to fire-related calls. They are ordered not to respond; they are not allowed to be involved with patient care although they are meeting the county mandate.”

The result of these “segregated rigs” is a delay in response times, with parts of the city going uncovered by paramedics providing advanced life support resources, Sattley said. In other words, in the name of public safety, Beverly Hills officials are making the public less safe.

William Amalu, a San Francisco firefighter, told me that his city, fire department, and even the firefighter union are marching in lockstep against the unvaccinated. The result is a growing crisis within the stations.

“There’s been a lot of bullying in the firehouses,” Amalu said, “and a lot of bullying by the command staff.” A chief reportedly told one crew not to bother submitting religious exemptions because they wouldn’t be approved anyway. Amalu said that a higher up told him that the leadership of the San Francisco Fire Department said during a meeting he was present at that they had no intention of handling religious and medical exemptions in good faith. It seemed like paranoid hearsay—until the applications came back and all were rejected. As of Oct. 13, out of about 800 San Francisco city workers who have asked for medical or religious exemptions to avoid termination, not a single request has been approved, a human resources official [told](#) the Associated Press.

A call and an email to the San Francisco Fire Department’s information officer and human resources center requesting comment wasn’t immediately returned.

In Amalu's rejection, the department acknowledged the sincerity of his religious convictions but declined him because "accommodation would pose a direct threat to the health and safety of others and/or yourself," according to an official form he allowed me to review. Further, the document states accommodation would prevent him from performing "essential functions" and "result in undue hardship for the city."

But Amalu says the reasoning behind his rejection conflicts with the department's public messaging. During a city meeting, the question was posed to the municipal departments: could you provide essential services with the number of employees you are slated to lose? A higher-up who was present told Will that every department gave a negative answer, especially the Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA). The SFMTA oversees San Francisco's massive public transit system, which is anticipating service disruptions for buses and trains due to impending firings of unvaccinated workers. At about 11 percent of the agency's workforce, it has the most unvaccinated number of employees of any city department. MTA employees have complained about "threatening" letters from managers warning of discipline or terminations, the *San Francisco Examiner* [reported](#).

San Francisco Fire Department Chief Jeanine Nicholson has downplayed the potential for disrupted essential services. According to her, the department has contingency plans to make up for potential firings and resignations, so there isn't any reason to worry.

Nicholson mentioned "not-compliant" firefighters during a [Sept. 22](#) meeting with city officials. "We have 122 people who are not compliant; out of that 122, 18 of them are on long-term leave, so really we have 104 people," she said. "We'll see what the final number is, but we'll definitely be losing some people due to the vaccination."

In an earlier internal meeting, long before the mandates were imposed, Nicholson asked Stephanie Phelps, the department's nurse practitioner over Zoom: "Why are we not mandating the vaccine? Because I would love to mandate the vaccine." Phelps explained that such measures are historically rare and, ironically, that "states are unlikely to enact mandatory COVID-19 vaccination mandates in the absence of long-term safety data." Nicholson was nonplussed with that answer. "Despite what you said, I would still like to mandate the vaccine for our members, but I can't."

For his part, Amalu feels betrayed. "I, and every other member facing termination, have bled and wept for this department," he said. "This is not just affecting me, but rather thousands of San Francisco employees who have families to feed and have placed their trust in this city to be there for them when times are tough."

It's unclear what the contingency plan for mass firings of essential workers looks like. Firefighters and paramedics are not easily replaced anywhere in America. Even before the pandemic, localities across the country were battling shortages of [medics](#) and [firefighters](#). The same goes for police departments. Indeed, amid the ongoing crime surge, dismissing cops over vaccine noncompliance is a bit like playing Russian roulette with public safety.

A new *Guardian* [analysis](#) found homicides across the 12 counties that make up the greater San Francisco region soared 25 percent in 2020, compared with the previous year. That is 114 homicides more than the year before. The San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) is currently [short](#) 400 officers and has a hard time attracting new recruits. Nevertheless, an officer with that department told me that about a hundred unvaccinated officers are on the chopping block.

Two months ago, there were 500 hundred unvaccinated members of the SFPD. However, pressure from the city, the department's leadership, and an antagonistic police union caused many officers to grudgingly take the jab, said the officer, who asked to remain anonymous because of fear of retaliation for speaking out. SFPD members who stood their ground on principle had the rug yanked out from under them, the officer said.

"We were granted about 150 religious exemptions—they were approved, permanent exemptions," the officer said. "But about a month later, leadership effectively rescinded them by saying they needed 'additional questions' answered." Every application was subsequently and officially rejected, the officer said.

Many of the SFPD cops forced to vaccinate are reportedly in talks with other departments about transferring. For the underpaid and overworked, it's not hard to imagine that being bullied into taking a drug, by their own union no less, against their religious or ethical reservations was the final straw.

Even if the SFPD could find more bodies to replace the outgoing uniforms, they wouldn't hit the streets right away. In Frisco, someone is not considered a full-fledged, independent officer until a minimum probationary period of two years. "They've talked about closing stations," the officer told me. "It's going to get ugly." Things already look that way. Another officer reported they had to wait two hours for an ambulance to arrive on the scene of a medical emergency.

The military may soon experience manpower problems, too. A Coast Guard officer told me about his experience and why he and many others feel up against the wall. The Coast Guard officer, who asked to remain anonymous because he fears that his pension and benefits could be in jeopardy if he speaks out, said he isn't necessarily anti-vaccine. But he is leery of the pharmaceutical industry's rush to sell its wares without any long-term data about side effects.

The Coast Guard officer's stance has only hardened due to what he sees as an emerging double standard in the military. When the vaccinated catch COVID-19, [as they can and often do](#), no one seems to mind much. However, when the unvaccinated fall ill, there's hell to pay. "Senior leadership is hugging this line," he said, "where they say, 'we're not punishing you for being unvaccinated, we're just trying to be safe'—but it's starting to feel more like it is punishment.'"

For the unvaccinated, there are default restrictions on travel and stricter quarantine protocols not only for those who are sick but those who are presumed "exposed"—a vague term. A vaccinated person exposed to COVID can resume work upon producing a negative test, but an unvaccinated person cannot—they are forced to isolate even if they can prove they're not sick.

The two-tiered system is frustrating. "They're being vague, they're threatening us that we're failing to obey lawful orders, and they're having us sign documentation about being counseled to take the vaccine." Those signatures will make it easier to discharge them in the end, but Coast Guard senior leadership hasn't even made it clear what kind of discharge it will be if they pull the trigger.

How the military jettisons the unvaccinated will determine whether they receive full benefits, or benefits at all, from their time served. Without an honorable discharge,

someone with a sterling service record could be sent off with the professional equivalent of a misdemeanor or a felony.

The question is, how many people is the military willing to lose? The Coast Guard assists in various domestic missions, from law enforcement activities to search and rescue operations. Replacing them isn't easy and discharging them won't make America safer. The Army is making a [similar gambit](#): 485,900 active-duty soldiers have until Dec. 15 to be vaccinated. Another 336,500 National Guard and 189,800 reserve troops have until the end of June. With [looming deadlines](#), hundreds of thousands more across all the other branches haven't complied with vaccine mandates.

Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote that "the degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons." Something similar can be deduced by how we treat the unvaccinated. These essential workers kept at their jobs before vaccines were available. Yet they and their families are now suffering professionally and financially for their convictions. Their unions are against them, their superiors have turned on them, their cities have shunned them. They served America, but America is turning its back on them.

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