

The California nurses strike and the right to health care

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party
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Thousands of nurses and other health care workers in the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) and the California Nurses Association (CNA) are carrying out a limited strike this week against health care conglomerate Kaiser Permanente. The following statement will be distributed by supporters of the Socialist Equality Party.

The opposition of thousands of health care workers to the efforts by Kaiser Permanente to impose sharp cuts in health and pension benefits, while failing to address chronic understaffing, deserves the active support of all workers.

The nurses' struggle raises two basic issues for working people: the right to a decent job with full benefits for all health care workers, and the right to health care for the working class as a whole. Both of these rights are under attack.

The drive by Kaiser to extract concessions from its workers—including sharp increases in co-pays for health care and an end to the defined-benefit pension plan—takes place against the backdrop of a deepening economic depression, in which mass unemployment is being utilized by corporations in every industry and every part of the country to attack jobs, wages and benefits.

Health care workers, of which there are close to 15 million in the United States, are no exception. They face an attack on wages and benefits and cuts to staff, driven by the profit interests of the giant companies that dominate the health care industry.

Over the past year, signs of opposition have begun to emerge, from nurses in the University of California hospital system opposing the influence of private corporations, to nurses in Minnesota fighting against the gutting of pensions and the elimination of full medical coverage for part-time nurses, to health care workers in Maine demanding increased staffing and improvements in patient safety.

At the same time, millions of people are losing health care coverage, seeing costs rise and benefits cut. Private corporations are eliminating health care coverage, while governments at the state and federal level—including the Brown and Obama administrations—are ruthlessly slashing health care programs.

The media and corporate establishment present nurses' opposition to the ruthless policies of large corporations as a threat to patients' health. This is the exact opposite of the truth. The understaffing that is endemic to the health care industry has a direct impact on patient safety and health. A similar campaign is being waged against teachers, who are being blamed for the crisis of the public education system.

The limited one-day strike being organized by the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) will do nothing to halt the attack on Kaiser Permanente workers. The company has prepared well in advance for this action, which is intended to let off steam as the union negotiates for concessions.

To address the health care crisis, the Socialist Equality Party calls for:

1. An end to all attacks on the jobs, wages and benefits of health care workers, who perform one of the most important social functions. All workers must be guaranteed a livable income with full benefits.

2. A massive program to hire and train hundreds of thousands of doctors, nurses and other health care workers throughout the country to address understaffing and ensure health care access for everyone.

3. An end to the privately-owned health care system, in which giant corporations rake in \$200 billion a year in profits. This means the establishment of free, high-quality state-run health care for all.

The fight for this program requires a political struggle against the Democrats and Republicans.

The Obama administration is now spearheading the attack on jobs and health care throughout the country. His budget proposals released this week would slash hundreds of billions of dollars from Medicare and Medicaid, building on cuts already included in his so-called health care “reform.” Both parties are intent on using the economic crisis as an opportunity to carry out an unprecedented attack on basic health care programs.

The government of Jerry Brown in California, meanwhile, has taken off where Schwarzenegger left off, insisting that the state’s budget deficit must be paid for through even more cuts in health care and education.

The common line from the political and corporate establishment is that there is “no money” to provide decent wages for workers and health care for all. This is after trillions of dollars have been handed to the banks, and corporations are sitting on record amounts of cash.

A struggle by the working class requires at the same time a break with the official trade unions, which are opposed to any serious struggle to defend working-class living standards.

The NUHW, like all the unions in California, supports the Brown administration and works to

subordinate workers to the Democratic Party. The union postures as a “left” alternative to the Service Employees International Union. However, it is just as absolutely committed to supporting the Obama administration, which is now leading the attack on workers throughout the country.

A resolution to the health care crisis in the US is impossible within the framework of the capitalist system. Economic life must be organized according to a rational plan, decided democratically by those who produce society’s wealth, i.e., by workers, for the satisfaction of human needs, not private profit. This is the fight for socialism.

The Socialist Equality Party urges nurses and workers to take up the fight for socialism!

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