California's NUHW nurses union affiliates with CNA ahead of vote at Kaiser hospitals

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After two years of legal delays, 43,500 healthcare workers at Kaiser Permanente in California, are expected to re-vote on whether to be represented by the Service Employees Industrial Union (SEIU) or the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW), which split from SEIU in 2009.

When it was formed, the NUHW was heralded by many organizations that operate within the orbit of the unions as a militant, progressive, and democratic organization that would revitalize the unions. However, in their four years of existence it has been business as usual, exemplified in the NUHW's decision earlier this month to affiliate with the California Nurses Association (CNA).

The election at Kaiser was first called in 2010, and the SEIU won 18,290 votes to the NUHW's 11,364. However, the National Labor Relations Board accepted the NUHW's appeal, which centered around the charge that Kaiser and the SEIU intimidated workers by, among other things, withholding promised raises from those who supported the NUHW. Since then both the SEIU and NUHW have claimed that the other union was delaying the re-run of the election.

Despite what essentially amounts to a conflict over turf, there are in fact no fundamental differences between the two unions. Both are entirely oriented to the Democratic Party, even as the Obama administration pushes ahead with cuts to health care programs and attacks on the working class. They treat their members as little more than electoral bargaining chips.

The NUHW arose from tactical disagreements within the SEIU about whether the union could more effectively secure its dues base through open collaboration with the employers or through token opposition. During Andy Stern's tenure as union president, the SEIU sought to buy employer neutrality in organizing drives by offering concessions.

The SEIU, for example, negotiated an agreement in 2003 with several nursing home providers which controlled 284 homes in California. The union promised the employers to lobby for greater Medi-Cal reimbursement rates, to oppose any minimum staffing or reimbursement legislation that the employers opposed, and to enforce a no-strike clause. This was in exchange for the "right" to organize 42 of the nursing homes.

The leadership of SEIU-United Healthcare Workers West opposed these measures out of fear of being exposed before their own membership. NUHW president Sal Rosselli, former head of SEIU-UHW West, told one interviewer "We have always had relations with employers, but we have approached even cooperation from a standpoint of strength. We can't surrender traditional rights, like the right to picket, to strike or to bargain."

What precisely Rosselli had in mind regarding strikes has been made abundantly clear since the NUHW formed out of SEIU-UHW in 2009.

NUHW already represents about 4,000 workers at Kaiser in five bargaining units. Since March 11, 2011, they have called four different strikes to pressure Kaiser, yet NUHW members are still working without a contract. Their general modus operandi is the same as that of the California Nurses Association, which has called seven one-day strikes and one two-day strike over the past two years at Sutter Health facilities in Northern California.

These strikes do much to demoralize nurses, who are locked out for five days for each strike, but do nothing to actually cut into the employer's profits. Sutter and Kaiser are able to readily hire scabs and turn a profit.

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The CNA has refused to give strike pay during these strikes, even as it sits on over $80 million in cash and is funneling millions of dollars to politicians. CNA has also negotiated contracts at individual Sutter hospitals in order to leave the largest and most militant hospitals isolated, instead of fighting for a company-wide contract.

The attack on health care and health care workers is part of national policy of the ruling class and its political representatives, including the Democratic Party, which all the various unions support.

As Obama demands cuts from Medicare and other social programs, he has received the endorsement of Rosselli at the NUHW, the SEIU, and the CNA. The unions have also been principal backers of California Governor Jerry Brown, also a Democrat, who has imposed drastic cuts throughout the state.

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