

California Nurses Association backs Democrats with Ebola protest

David Brown
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Last week the California Nurses Association (CNA), an affiliate of the National Nurses United (NNU), called a two-day strike at Kaiser Permanente facilities in Northern California and participated in a global protest over Ebola preparedness. While the issues are of major concern to health care workers, the union called the actions to boost illusions in the CNA—which is involved in drawn out negotiations with the health care giant—and the Democratic Party.

Nurses at Kaiser have been working without a contract since the end of August and negotiations for a new contract began a month before that. Conditions for nurses have been declining for years, particularly sharply since the enactment of Obamacare, which has encouraged cost cutting by the big hospital chains. Over the past three years the number of registered nurses and nurse practitioner positions at Kaiser have been cut by 2,046, or about 10 percent overall. Since the beginning of 2014, Kaiser has added 422,000 customers, a 5 percent increase.

To the extent that these new insurance customers receive care it is through speedup and adding more tasks onto a smaller workforce. While the nurses face declining and even dangerous work situations, the stream of new premiums has boosted Kaiser Permanente's profits, which are up 41 percent in 2014. Kaiser, a "non-profit," currently pours that money into a reserve fund of \$21.7 billion.

The conditions at Kaiser are far from unique, with health care providers across the country minimizing staffing, understocking supplies and reducing training to maximize profits. The dangerous consequences of these cost cutting measures were highlighted when two Texas nurses contracted Ebola in October while treating a patient from Liberia.

Brianna Aguirre, a whistleblower at the hospital in Dallas, detailed the lack of protective gear, lack of training and insufficient waste disposal on NBC's

"Today" show. According to Aguirre, garbage cans with infected waste were piled "to the ceiling" for hours, both in patient's rooms and in hallways, with hospital workers freely passing through and then moving on to treat other patients.

Although Ebola is exceedingly rare, the case brought attention to dangerous conditions facing nurses and a lack of preparedness for highly infectious diseases. The CNA called their strike at Kaiser to kick off broader protests on Wednesday over Ebola.

The two-day strike, called last Tuesday, affected 18,000 Kaiser nurses in 24 different cities. It fit the pattern of previous limited actions called by the union to channel support behind the Democrats while doing nothing to address the actual issues nurses and health care workers face. The union honed this style of "strike" during negotiations with Sacramento-based Sutter Health where the union called nine limited walkouts in two years, including a rally for the Democrats just before Election Day last November.

Indicative of a low turnout overall, only 200 nurses showed up at the Veteran's Day rally in Oakland, California, Kaiser headquarters. Tony Thurmond, the recently re-elected Democratic State Assemblyman, exhorted the nurses to keep communicating and Kaiser to keep negotiating. The disinterest in the rally was a reflection of a broader disillusionment with both big business parties in California where less than a third of eligible voters participated in the November 4 mid-term elections.

The walkout did not include 4,000 members of a CNA affiliate, the National Union of Healthcare Workers, at Kaiser. Those workers have been without a contract for four years and are preparing to vote on whether to have their own limited strike. According to Sal Rosselli, the head of the NUHW, the CNA did not even inform them in advance about the work action.

The NUHW affiliated with the CNA—paying them a share of dues in January of 2013 in exchange for the millions of dollars the CNA had given them as part of a representation campaign against the rival Service Employees International Union (SEIU). A CNA spokesperson, Chuck Idelson, claims they did inform the NUHW, but the lack of coordinated action is indicative of the political aims of the strike.

The CNA leadership has pushed the demand for Ebola protection as a method of “winning” concessions that have no real effect on working conditions and cost Kaiser Permanente effectively nothing.

One thousand nurses rallied Wednesday in front of the Oakland federal building and similar protests took place in other cities. In a coordinated political maneuver, the Department of Industrial Relations and the California Department of Health released new guidelines last Friday requiring hospitals to implement higher standards for the safe treatment of Ebola patients. The regulations were the result of meetings between Democratic Governor Jerry Brown and state health agency heads last month, but their release was painted as a response to the nurses’ job actions.

The CNA immediately declared the rules a great success. Rose Ann DeMoro praised Brown—a vicious enemy of the working class—saying, “He departed from the paralysis of government and corporate inaction. He listened intently and heard the nurses reports of how deeply unprepared and resistant hospitals were and he moved to protect the public, the nurses, and other health care workers. That’s how government should work. Gov. Brown has delivered an example for the nation.”

Brown, like his predecessor Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger, has been responsible for billions in cuts to social services in California, including health care and education, while increasing tax breaks for corporations.

Nationally, the CNA has been fully on board with the bipartisan attack on health care being carried out in Washington.



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