

Kaiser Permanente nurses in Los Angeles on one-week strike

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Twelve hundred registered nurses (RNs) at Kaiser Permanente's Los Angeles Medical Center (LAMC) walked out March 15 on a one-week strike. The action was called by the National Nurses United (NNU), a coalition of three unions, the main component of which is the California Nurses Association (CNA), an AFL-CIO affiliate.

The walk-out follows strikes and protests over the last several years against Kaiser and other profitable health care providers. The policies of these providers have resulted in lower living standards for health care workers and professionals, as well as cuts in staffing that put patients' safety at risk.

The nurses at the LAMC voted to join the CAN/NNU last July and are now looking for their first contract. The nurses have not seen a wage increase in six years. During that time, Kaiser has centralized a number of important specialty services in the Los Angeles location, resulting in seriously demanding shifts. LAMC is the regional center for services like Transcatheter Aortic Valve Implantation and for the treatment of young children with cancer.

Registered Nurse (RN) Roselle Gatdula, who has worked at the Los Angeles location for seven years, complained to the media that at times she has more than 30 patients on her floor needing her assistance, while having access to only two thermometers.

A major concern is understaffing. According to a press release from the CNA/NNU, coronary care unit RN Joel Briones pointed out that "Kaiser LAMC prides itself on being the tertiary flagship center for the Southern California region and has expanded services here in the past few years, but it is hard to provide quality care while we are constantly short staffed."

He also noted that, "Our patients deserve better. With billions in profits, the nurses are insisting Kaiser settle

a contract that reflects our role as patient advocates for the region."

In 2014, Kaiser Permanente reported revenues of \$56.4 billion and a net income of \$3.1 billion, an increase of nearly 15 percent from 2013. In 2014 the Affordable Care Act, known as Obamacare, provided an uptick in enrollment of more than 5.6 percent, or 510,000 new enrollees.

Last year, net income fell to \$1.9 billion, while enrollment grew by 650,000. The decline was mainly due to Wall Street's gyrations in 2015, which caused Kaiser's investments to suffer a loss of \$800 million.

The list of nurses' grievances includes a wage freeze and back wages allegedly owed to nurses for the last six years, as well as opposition to Kaiser's plan to open a medical school in Pasadena. The CNA claims that the school will divert funds from patient care at the LAMC.

None of the past actions or protests by the nurses' unions have resolved any of the essential issues. On the contrary, nurses criticize worsening and dangerous conditions.

Kaiser continues to operate during the strike, hiring temporary employees through agencies like American Mobile Traveling Nursing. However, the temporary nurses are only oriented for a brief period, at times for one day, exposing patients to risk and the nurses to blame.

Last spring, the CNA called a strike as part of a maneuver aimed at recruiting thousands of dues-paying members when the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) lost official recognition at the LAMC location. In August 2015 the National Labor Relations Board certified the CNA.

Now, the union has organized a stunt strike to solidify its role as main negotiator with Kaiser. The company has played along, knowing the union will not

jeopardize its profits. “We believe that contract negotiations should take place directly at the bargaining table and not on the street,” said Kaiser’s statement. It promised no reprisals for the one-week strike.

The CNA has deliberately called an isolated and toothless walk-out, hoping to wear down the nurses and “soften them up” for a rotten deal with Kaiser.

Last week nurses at the Newton-Wellesley Hospital in the Boston area, members of the Massachusetts Nurses Association, which also belongs to the NNU, voted by more than 90 percent to strike. The strike vote is the second the nurses have taken in the past year. The union called off the first walkout.

The NNU has supported Bernie Sanders’ campaign for the Democratic Party presidential nomination from early on. In April 2015, Sanders voted for HR2, known as the Medicare Access and CHIP Reauthorization Act of 2015, a bipartisan bill that represents a historic attack on Medicare. The bill’s basic goal is the slashing of Medicare spending and its reorientation toward barebones-type of coverage in the name of “waste cutting.”

It should be noted that such a bill is perfectly in line with Kaiser’s business model, aimed at cutting costs in order to boost profitability: the result in both cases is reduced and inadequate health care, needless suffering and avoidable death.

More broadly, the NNU’s support for Sanders must be viewed within the context of the union’s orientation to economic nationalism, which forms the foundation of Sanders’ campaign. He attacks pro-corporate trade deals like NAFTA not from the point of view of opposing big business, but as part of an effort to pit US workers against workers in other countries.

The CNA/NNU strategy works in favor of corporations like Kaiser. After a week of allowing workers to let off steam, the CNA will sit down at the negotiating table and attempt to engineer a contract that will satisfy corporate needs and also maintain its dues base, which makes possible generous salaries for union officials.



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